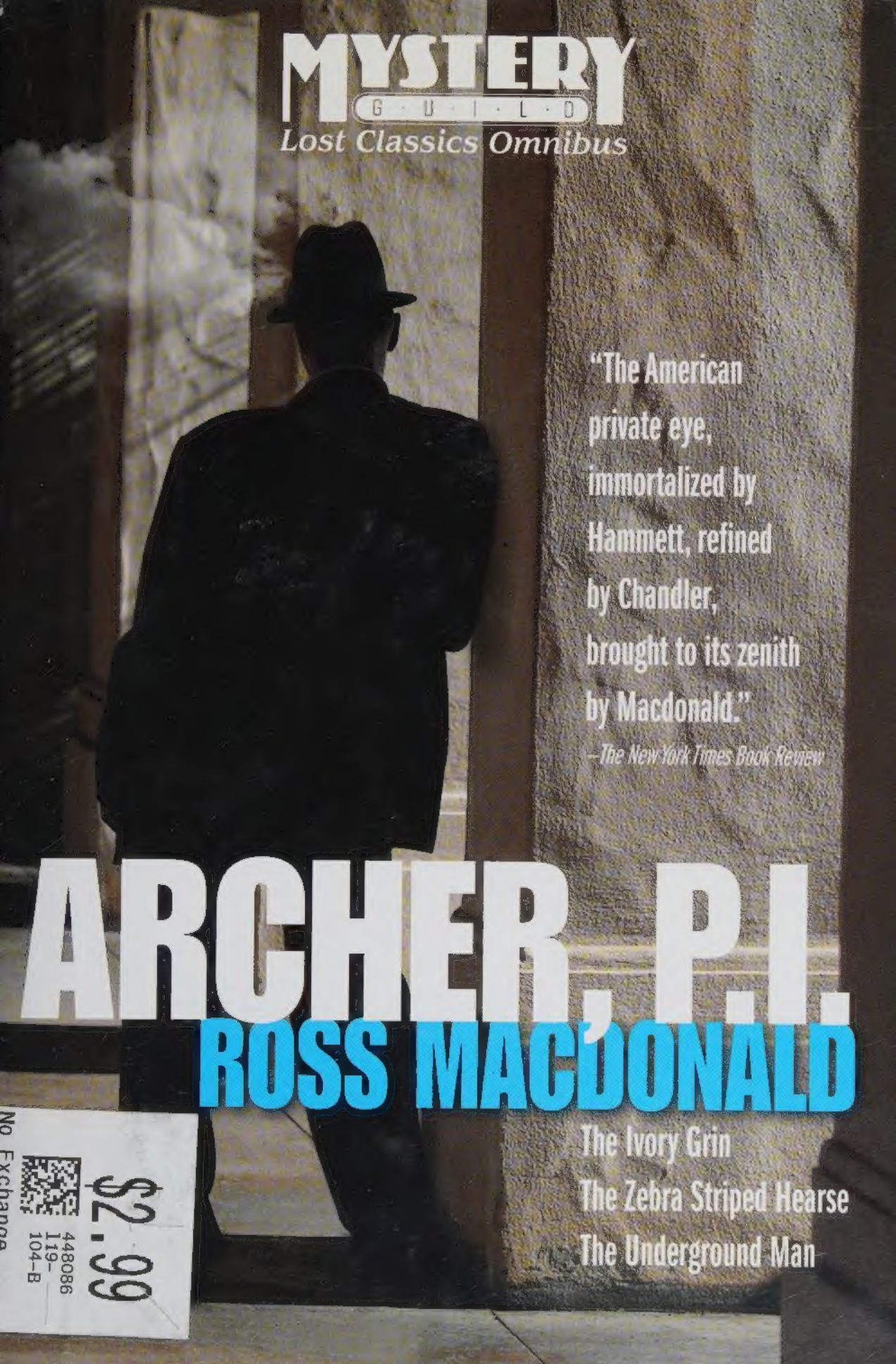
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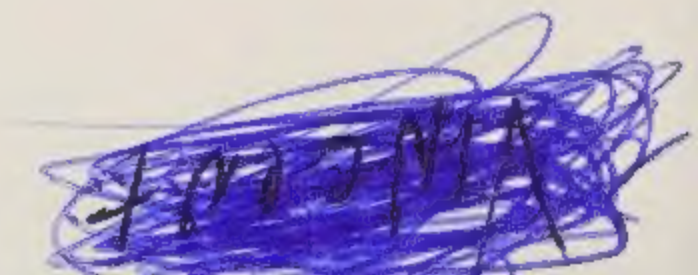

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THE UNDERGROUND MAN

by

Ross Macdonald

Mystery Guild
Garden City, New York

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Ross Macdonald

THE IVORY GRIN

Ross Macdonald's real name was Kenneth Millar. Born near San Francisco in 1915 and raised in Ontario, Millar returned to the U.S. as a young man and published his first novel in 1944. He served as the president of the Mystery Writers of America and was awarded their Grand Master Award as well as the Mystery Writers of Great Britain's Gold Dagger Award. He died in 1983.

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THE IVORY GRIN

THE IVORY GRIN

Ross Macdonald

BLACK LIZARD

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To all HANDS

THE IVORY GRIN

chapter 1

I FOUND HER waiting at the door of my office. She was a stocky woman of less than medium height, wearing a blue slack suit over a blue turtleneck sweater, and a blue mink stole that failed to soften her outlines. Her face was squarish and deeply tanned, its boyish quality confirmed by dark hair cut short at the nape. She wasn't the type you'd expect to be up and about at eight thirty in the morning, unless she'd been up all night.

As I unlocked the door she stood back and looked up at me with the air of an early bird surveying an outsize worm. I said: "Good morning."

"Mr. Archer?"

Without waiting for an answer, she offered me a stubby brown hand. Her grip, armed with rings, was as hard as a man's. Releasing her hand, she placed it behind my elbow, ushered me into my own office, and closed the door behind her.

"I'm very glad to see you, Mr. Archer."

She had begun to irritate me already. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why are you glad to see me?"

"Because. Let's sit down and be comfortable so we can talk." Without charm, her petite willfulness was disquieting.

"About anything in particular?"

She seated herself in an armchair by the door and looked around the waiting-room. It was neither large nor expensively furnished, and she seemed to be registering those circumstances. Her only comment was to click her ringed fists together in front of her. There were three rings on each hand. They had good-sized diamonds in them, which looked real.

"I have a job for you," she said to the sagging green imitation-leather

davenport against the opposite wall. Her manner had changed from girlish vivacity to boyish earnestness. "It's not what you'd consider a big job, but I'm willing to pay well. Fifty a day?"

"And expenses. Who sent you to me?"

"But nobody. Do sit down. I've known your name for ages, simply ages."

"You have the advantage of me."

Her gaze returned to me, tireder and older after its little slumming excursion around my antechamber. There were olive drab thumbprints under her eyes. Maybe she had been up all night, after all. In any case she looked fifty, in spite of the girlishness and the boyishness. Americans never grew old: they died; and her eyes had guilty knowledge of it.

"Call me Una," she said.

"Do you live in Los Angeles?"

"Not exactly. Where I live doesn't matter. I'll tell you what does, if you want me to be blunt."

"I couldn't bear it if you weren't."

Her hard dry glance went over me almost tangibly and rested on my mouth. "You look all right. But you sound kind of Hollywood to me."

I was in no mood to swap compliments. The ragged edge on her voice, and her alternation of fair and bad manners bothered me. It was like talking to several persons at once, none of them quite complete.

"Protective coloration." I caught her glance and held it. "I meet a lot of different types."

She didn't flush. All that happened was that her face looked a little congested for a moment. It passed, and the incomplete boy in her came to the point:

"I mean, do you make a habit of cutting your clients' throats? I've had some pretty discouraging experiences."

"With detectives?"

"With people. Detectives are people."

"You're full of compliments this morning, Mrs. —"

"I said just call me Una. I'm not proud. Can I trust you to do what I want you to do and stop? Take your money and go about your business?"

"Money?"

"Here." She produced a crumpled bill from a blue leather pouch and tossed it to me as if it were an old piece of Kleenex and I were a wastebasket. I caught it. It was a hundred-dollar bill, but I didn't put it away.

"A retainer always helps to establish a bond of loyalty," I said. "I'll still cut your throat, of course, but I'll give you sodium pentothal first."

She addressed the ceiling, darkly: "Why does everybody in these parts work so hard for laughs? You haven't answered my question."

"I'll do what you want me to do so long as it's not illegal and makes some kind of sense."

"I'm not suggesting anything illegal," she said sharply. "And I promise you it makes sense."

"All the better." I tucked the bill into the bill compartment of my wallet, where it looked rather lonely, and opened the door to the inner office.

There were three chairs in it, and no room for a fourth. After I had opened the Venetian blinds, I took the swivel chair behind the desk. The armchair I pointed out for her faced me across the desk. Instead, she sat down in a straight chair against the partition, away from the window and the light.

Crossing her trousered legs, she pushed a cigarette into a short gold holder and lit it with a squat gold lighter.

"About this job I mentioned. I want you to locate a certain person, a colored girl who used to work for me. She left my house two weeks ago, on the first of September to be exact. It was good riddance of bad rubbish as far as I was concerned, only she took along a few little knickknacks of mine. A pair of ruby earrings, a gold necklace."

"Insured?"

"No. Actually they're not very valuable. Their value is sentimental—you know? They mean a lot to me, sentimentally." She tried to look sentimental and failed.

"It sounds like a matter for the police."

"I don't think so." Her face closed up solid like brown wood. "You make your living tracing people, don't you? Are you trying to talk yourself out of a living?"

I took the hundred-dollar bill out of my wallet and dropped it on the desk in front of me. "Apparently."

"Don't be so touchy." She forced her grim little mouth into a smile. "The truth is, Mr. Archer, I'm a fool about people. Anybody that ever worked for me, even if they took advantage of me—well, I feel responsible for them. I had a very genuine affection for Lucy, and I guess I still have. I don't wish to make any trouble for her, nothing like that. I wouldn't dream of sicking the police on Lucy. All I really want is a chance to talk to her, and get my things back. And I was so hoping that you would be able to help me?"

She lowered her short bristling lashes over her hard black eyes. Maybe she could hear the music of distant violins. All I could hear was the pushing and hooting of traffic on the Boulevard one story down.

"I think you said she was a Negro."

"I have no race prejudice—"

"I don't mean that. Black girls are unfindable in this city. I've tried."

"Lucy isn't in Los Angeles. I know where she is."

"Why don't you simply go and talk to her?"

"I intend to. First I'd like to get some idea of her movements. I want to know who she sees, before I talk to her, and after."

"That's a pretty elaborate way to go about recovering some jewelry. What's the purpose?"

"It's none of your business." She tried to say it gaily and girlishly, but the hostility showed through.

"I believe you're right." I pushed the bill across the desk towards her, and stood up. "In fact, it sounds like a wild-goose chase. Why don't you try the classified ads in the *Times*? There are plenty of investigators who live on a steady diet of wild goose."

"By God, I think the man's honest." She spoke to one side as if her alter ego was standing there. "All right, Mr. Archer, you have me, I guess."

The image didn't excite me, and I registered a suitable apathy.

"I mean I'm in a hurry. I haven't got time to shop around. I'll even admit that I'm in a spot of trouble."

"Which has nothing to do with petty theft or costume jewelry. You could have thought of a better story. But please don't try."

"I'm not. This is straight. When Lucy was working in my house she naturally got to know my family affairs. Well, there was bad feeling when she left, not on my side, on hers. There are one or two things that could embarrass me if she decided to spread them. So I want to know who she's seeing. From that I can draw my own conclusions."

"If I knew a little more about these embarrassing facts—"

"I'm not going to tell you, that's definite. My whole idea in coming to you is to keep them from getting out. Now what could be franker than that?"

I still didn't like her story, but the second version was an improvement over the first. I sat down again. "What sort of work did she do for you?"

She hesitated briefly. "General housework. She's a maid. Her full name is Lucy Champion."

"And where did she work for you?"

"In my house, naturally. There's no reason for you to know where it is."

I swallowed my irritation. "Where is she now, or is that another secret?"

"I know I seem unreasonable and suspicious," she said. "Believe me, I've been burned. I take it you'll do this job for me?"

"I might as well."

"She's in Bella City, up the Valley. You'll have to hurry to make it before noon. It's a good two hours from here."

"I know where it is."

"Good. A friend of mine saw her there yesterday, in a restaurant on Main Street near the corner of Hidalgo. My friend talked to the waiter and found out that Lucy eats her lunch there every day between twelve and one. It's a combination café and liquor store called Tom's. You can't miss it."

"A picture of Lucy would help."

"I'm sorry." She spread her hands in an automatic gesture that placed her ancestry on the north shore of the Mediterranean. "The best I can do is a description. She's a handsome girl, and so light she could pass for South American or California Spanish. She has nice big brown eyes, and not too much of a mouth, like some of them. A nice little figure, too, if she wasn't so skinny."

"How old?"

"Not old. Younger than me—than I." I noticed the self-correction, as well as the self-flattery in the comparison. "In her early twenties, I'd say."

"Hair?"

"Black, in a straight bob. She keeps it straight with oil."

"Height?"

"A couple of inches taller than I. I'm five foot two."

"Distinguishing characteristics?"

"Her legs are her best feature, as she well knows." Una couldn't pay another woman an unmixed compliment. "Her nose is sort of turned up—cute, if her nostrils didn't sort of stare at you."

"What was she wearing when your friend saw her?"

"A black-and-white checkered sharkskin suit. That's how I know it was her. I gave her the suit a couple of months ago. She altered it for herself."

"So you won't want the suit back."

That seemed to strike a nerve. She removed the butt that had gone out in her holder and crushed it violently in the ashtray beside her chair. "I've taken quite a bit from you, mister."

"We're about even now," I said. "I've been keeping score. I just wouldn't want you to think that you were buying very much for a hundred bucks. I have to watch that around here. You're suspicious. I'm touchy."

"You talk as if you were bitten by a bear. Do you have an unhappy home life, by any chance?"

"I was just going to ask you about yours."

"Don't start worrying about my home life. That's one thing—I don't want you talking to Lucy." She had a quick change of mood, or affected

one. "Oh hell, it's my life and I live it. We're wasting time. Are you willing to do what I say, no more no less?"

"No more anyway. She mightn't turn up at the restaurant today. If she does, I tail her, keep a record of where she goes, who she sees. And report to you?"

"Yes. This afternoon if possible. I'll be registered at the Mission Hotel in Bella City. Ask for Mrs. Larkin." She glanced at the square gold watch on her right wrist. "You better get going. If she leaves town let me know immediately, and stay with her."

She moved deliberately and quickly to the outer door. Her walk was the shortest distance between things she wanted. The back of her neck was heavy under the cropped hair, swollen with muscle as if she had often used it for butting and rooting. Turning at the door to lift a flashing hand in good-bye, she hitched the mink stole higher. I wondered if she used it to conceal that telltale grossness.

I went back to my desk and dialed the switchboard of my answering service. Standing by the window, I could see the sidewalk below through the slats of the Venetian blind. It swarmed with a bright young crowd of guys and girls buzzing and fluttering in pursuit of happiness and the dollar.

Una emerged among them, dark and foreshortened by the height from which I was watching her. She turned uphill, her head thrust forward on her heavy neck, like an irresistible force searching for an immovable object. The switchboard answered in a youthful female gurgle on the fifth ring. I told it I was going out of town for the weekend.

chapter 2

FROM THE TOP of the grade I could see the mountains on the other side of the valley, leaning like granite slabs against the blue tile sky. Below me the road meandered among brown September hills spattered with the ink-blot shadows of oaks. Between these hills and the further mountains the valley floor was covered with orchards like vivid green chenille, brown corduroy ploughed fields, the thrifty patchwork of truck gardens. Bella City stood among them, a sprawling dusty town miniatured and tidied by clear space. I drove down into it.

The packing houses of the growers' associations stood like airship hangars on the edge of the green fields. Parched nurseries and suburban ranchos offered tomato plants and eggs and lima beans for sale. There was a roadside traffic of filling stations, drive-ins, motels slumping dejectedly under optimistic names. In the road the big trucks went by in both directions, trailing oil smoke and a long loud raspberry for Bella City.

The highway was a rough social equator bisecting the community into lighter and darker hemispheres. Above it in the northern hemisphere lived the whites who owned and operated the banks and churches, clothing and grocery and liquor stores. In the smaller section below it, cramped and broken up by ice plants, warehouses, laundries, lived the darker ones, the Mexicans and Negroes who did most of the manual work in Bella City and its hinterland. I remembered that Hidalgo Street ran parallel to the highway and two blocks below it.

It was fairly hot and very dry. The dryness ached in my sinuses. Main Street was loud and shiny with noon traffic moving bumper to bumper. I turned left on East Hidalgo Street and found a parking space in the first block. Housewives black, brown, and sallow were hugging parcels and pushing shopping carts on the sidewalk. Above them a ramshackle house,

with paired front windows like eyes demented by earthquake memories, advertised Rooms for Transients on one side, Palm Reading on the other. A couple of Mexican children, boy and girl, strolled by hand in hand in a timeless noon on their way to an early marriage.

Two privates appeared from nowhere, pale in their uniforms like young ghosts trapped by reality. I got out and followed them across Main and into a magazine shop near the corner. The unlit neon sign of Tom's Café was almost directly across the street. Beer on Tap. Steam Beer. Try Our Spaghetti Special.

The soldiers were inspecting a rack of comic books with the air of connoisseurs. They selected half a dozen each, paid for them and left.

"Milk sops," the clerk said. He was a gray-headed man with smeared spectacles. "They draft them in didees these days. Cradle to grave in one jump. When I was in the AEF."

I grunted, stood by the window looking out. Tom's Café had a varied clientele. Business suits and overalls, sport shirts and T-shirts and sweaters went in and came out. The women wore gingham dresses, sunsuits with halters, slacks and shirts, light topcoats over faded flowered silk. There were whites among them, but Negro and Mexican heads were in the majority. I didn't see a black-and-white sharkskin suit.

"When I was in the AEF," the clerk said softly and wistfully from behind the counter.

I picked up a magazine and pretended to read it, watching the changing crowd on the other side of the street. The light danced in standing waves on the car tops.

The clerk said in a changed tone: "You're not supposed to read them until you pay for them."

I tossed him a quarter, and he was mollified: "You know how it is. Business is business."

"Sure." I said it gruffly, to ward off the AEF.

Through the dusty window, the people resembled extras in a street scene in very early color. The faces of the buildings were depthless and so ugly that I couldn't imagine their insides. Tom's Café was flanked on one side by a pawnshop displaying violins and shotguns in its window, on the other side by a movie house plastered with lurid advertisements for *La Liga de Muchachos*. The crowd hurried faster, it seemed, and then the scene focused on the double swinging doors of Tom's Café. A light-skinned Negro girl with short black hair and a black-and-white checked suit came out, paused on the edge of the sidewalk and turned south.

"You forgot your book," the clerk called after me.

I was halfway across the street when she reached the corner of Hidalgo and Main. She turned left, walking quickly with short steps. The

sun gleamed on her oiled hair. She passed within three feet of my convertible. I slid behind the wheel and started the engine.

Lucy carried herself with an air. Her hips swayed pear-like from the narrow stem of her waist, and her stocking-less tan legs worked pleasantly below the checked skirt. I let her cover the rest of the block, then followed her by fits and starts from parking place to parking place. In the second block I stopped in front of a frame Buddhist church. In the third, a pool hall where black and Mexican and Asian boys handled cues over green tables. In the fourth, a redbrick school in a yellow desert of playground. Lucy kept on walking due east.

The road degenerated from broken asphalt to dirt, and the sidewalk ended. She picked her way carefully among the children who ran and squatted and rolled in the dust, past houses with smashed windows patched with cardboard and scarred peeling doors or no doors at all. In the photographic light the wretchedness of the houses had a stern kind of clarity or beauty, like old men's faces in the sun. Their roofs sagged and their walls leaned with a human resignation, and they had voices: quarreling and gossiping and singing. The children in the dust played fighting games.

Lucy left Hidalgo Street at the twelfth intersection and headed north along the green board-fence of a baseball park. A block short of the highway she went east again into a different kind of street. It had a paved road and sidewalks, small green lawns in front of small well-kept houses, white frame and stucco. I parked at the corner, half hidden by the clipped eugenia hedge that surrounded the corner lot. The name of the street was stenciled on the curb. Mason Street.

About the middle of the block, a faded green Ford coupé stood in a driveway under a pepper tree in front of a white bungalow. A Negro boy in yellow swimming trunks was hosing it down. He was very large and strong-looking. At a distance of half a block I could see the muscles shimmering in his wet black arms. The girl crossed the street toward him, walking more slowly and gracefully than she had been.

When he noticed her he smiled and flicked the spray from the hose in her direction. She dodged and ran toward him, forgetting her dignity. He laughed and shot the water straight up into the tree like a jet of visible laughter that reached me as sound a half second later. Kicking off her shoes, she scampered around the car one step ahead of his miniature rain. He dropped the hose and raced around after her.

She reappeared on my side and snatched up the nozzle. When he came around the car she turned the white stream full in his face. He came on dripping and laughing, and wrenched the nozzle out of her hands. Their laughter joined.

Face to face on the green grass, they held each other by the arms.

Their laughter ended suddenly. The pepper tree shaded them in green silence. The water from the hose bubbled springlike in the grass.

A door slammed. I heard its delayed percussion like the sound of a distant ax-blow. The lovers sprang apart. A stout black woman had come out on the porch of the white bungalow. She stood with her hands clasped at her thick aproned waist and looked at them without speaking. At least her lips didn't move perceptibly.

The boy picked up a chamois and began to polish the car top like somebody wiping out the sins of the world. The girl stooped for her shoes with an air of earnest concentration, as if she'd been searching high and low for them. She passed the boy without turning her head and disappeared around the side of the bungalow. The stout black woman went back into the house, closing the screen door soundlessly behind her.

chapter 3

I CIRCLED THREE quarters of the block, left my car short of the intersection, and entered Mason Street from the other end, on foot. Under the pepper tree the Negro boy was still wiping down the Ford. He glanced at me as I crossed the road, but paid me no further attention.

His house was the fifth on the north side of the street. I opened the white picket-gate of the third house, a stucco cottage wearing a television aerial like a big metal feather in its cap. I knocked on its screen door and took a black notebook and a pencil out of my inside breast pocket.

The inner door was opened a few inches, the thin yellow face of a middle-aged Negro inserted in the aperture. "What do you want?" When they shut, his lips turned inward over his teeth.

I opened the notebook and held the pencil poised over it. "My firm is making a national survey."

"There's nothing we need." The ingrown mouth closed, and the door closed after it.

The door of the next house was standing open. I could see directly into a living-room crowded with old Grand Rapids furniture. When I knocked on the door, it rattled against the wall.

The boy under the pepper tree looked up from the fender he was polishing. "Just walk right in. She'll be glad to see you. Aunty's glad to see anybody." He added: "Mister," as a deliberate afterthought and turned his wedge-shaped back on me.

The voice of the house spoke up from somewhere in the rear. It was old and faded but it had a carrying quality, like a chant: "Is that you, Holly? No, it wouldn't be Holly yet. Anyway, come in, whoever you are. You must be one of my friends, and they visit me in my room now, now that I can't get out. So come on in."

The voice went on without a break, the words linked to each other by a pleasant deep-South slurring. I followed it like a thread across the living-room, down a short hallway, through the kitchen to a room that opened from it. "I used to have my visitors in the sitting-room, that wasn't so long ago. Just lately the doctor told me, you stay in bed now, honey, don't try to cook any more, let Holly do for you. So here I lie."

The room was small and bare, lit and ventilated by a single window, which was open. The source of the voice was a bed beside the window. Propped with pillows against the maple headboard, a Negro woman smiled from a sunken gray face, with great eyes like dark lanterns. Between the smiling blue lips the thread of talk unwound:

"It's a blessing for me, he said, that my joints are frozen solid with the arthritis, because if I tried to run around like I used to, my heart would give out sure. I told him he was a Job's comforter, what good is keeping my heart going like a watch that won't tell time if I can't get up and cook. He said I was one of the stiff-necked generations and I laughed right out in his face, I couldn't help it. That young doctor's a good friend of mine, I don't care what he says. Are you a doctor, son?"

The great eyes shone on me, and the blue lips smiled. I hated to lie when the human element cut across my work. I lied: "We're making a survey of radio users in southern California. I see you have a radio."

There was a small imitation-ivory table radio between her bed and the wall.

"I certainly have." She sounded disappointed. Her gray upper lip, faintly mustached, puckered in many vertical wrinkles.

"Is it working?"

"It certainly is working." The question revived her spirits by giving her a subject for conversation. "I wouldn't give house-room to a radio that wasn't working. I listen to it morning, noon and night, just shut it off the minute before you knocked on the door. I'll turn it on again when you go away. But don't hurry. Come in and sit down. I like to make new friends."

I sat in the room's only chair, a rocker near the foot of the bed. From there I could see the side of the white bungalow next door, with an open kitchen-window towards the rear.

"What's your name now, son?"

"Lew Archer."

"Lew Archer." She repeated it slowly, as if it were a short, eloquent poem. "Now that's a pretty name, a very pretty name. My name is Jones, after my last husband. Everybody calls me Aunty. I have three married daughters and four sons in Philadelphia and Chicago. Twelve grandchildren, six great-grandchildren, more on the way. See my pictures?" Above the radio, the wall was studded with thumbtacked snapshots. "It must be

relieving to you to get off your feet for a little. This survey job, does it pay much, son?"

"Not much."

"You wear nice clothes, though, that's a comfort to you."

"This job is only temporary. I wanted to ask you, do your neighbors have radios? I couldn't get an answer out of the man next door."

"That Toby man? He's a surly one. They have radio *and* television." Her sigh expressed envy and resignation. "He owns himself a half block of income property down on Hidalgo Street."

I made a meaningless entry in my notebook. "What about the other side?"

"Not Annie Norris. I was as churchy as Annie Norris when I had the free use of my limbs but I was never as stiff-necked as Annie. Never could see the harm in a little radio music. Annie claims that it's a contraption of the devil, and I told her she's not moving with the times. She wouldn't even let that boy of hers go to the moving pictures, and I told her worse things could happen to a boy than a little innocent entertainment. Worse things could and worse things did." She fell silent. One of her gnarled hands struggled up from where it rested on the sheet that covered her knees. "Speak of the devil. Hear that?"

With a surge and lunge of her entire body, she turned her face away, towards the window. Behind the walls of the house next door, two female voices were arguing.

"She's carrying on with her boarder again. Listen."

One voice was a heavy contralto, easily identified with the stout black woman. I caught fragments of what she said: "You listen . . . out of my house . . . making eyes at my son . . . get out . . . my son."

The other voice was soprano, shrill with fear and anger. "I didn't. It's a lie. You rented me the room for a month—"

The heavy voice broke like a wave: "Get out. Pack up and get. You can have your money back for the rest of the time. You'll be needing it to buy liquor, Miss Champion."

The screen door slammed again, and the boy's voice spoke inside: "What's going on in here? Mama, you leave Lucy alone."

"You stay out of this. It's none of your affair. Miss Champion is leaving."

"You can't throw her out like this." The boy's tones were high and hurt. "She's paid up to the end of the month."

"She's leaving, irregardless. Alex, you go to your room. What would your father think, he heard you talking to your mother the way you've been talking?"

"You do what your mother tells you," the girl said. "I wouldn't stay here anyway, after the insinuations."

"Insinuations!" The older woman gave the word a savage satiric twist. "These are facts I'm talking, Miss Champion, and they're not the only facts. I wouldn't soil my tongue with the other thing while Alex was listening—"

"What other thing?"

"You know what other thing. I didn't rent my good clean room for any such use as you put it to last evening. You entertained a man in your room last night and don't try to lie your way out of it."

If Lucy made any answer, it was too low to be heard. Mrs. Norris appeared suddenly at the kitchen window. I had no time to move back out of her line of sight, but she didn't raise her eyes. Her face was stony. She slammed the window down, and jerked the blind down after it.

Gasping and smiling, the old woman rolled back onto her pillows: "Well! It looks as if Annie's lost her boarder. I could have told her she was borrowing trouble, renting a room to that young Lucy creature with a grown boy in the house." She added with the candor of the very old, who have nothing but life to lose: "Shucks, if she really goes, there won't be no more arguments to listen to."

I got up and touched her thin flannelette shoulder. "It was nice to meet you, Aunty."

"Same to you, son. I hope you get yourself a better job than that walking job you got. I know what it does to the feet. I cooked all my life in big houses. You take good care of your feet. . . ." The voice trailed me out like a cobweb spun endlessly into space.

I went back to my car and drove it forward a few yards into a position from which I could watch the Norris house. My job was a walking job and a driving job, but mainly a sitting and waiting job. It was hot under the top of my car, but I needed it for cover. I took off my coat and sat and waited. The seconds piled up slowly into minutes like rows of hot bright pennies.

At two by my dashboard clock, which was working, a yellow cab entered Mason Street from the other end. It slowed and honked in front of the Norris house, turned in the driveway behind the Ford coupé, and backed into the curb. Lucy Champion came down the driveway with a suit-box under her arm and a hat on her head. Behind her Alex Norris, fully clothed now, carried a pair of matched gray suitcases. The driver put them in the trunk and Lucy got into the back seat with a reluctant awkwardness. Alex Norris watched the cab out of sight. From the porch, his mother watched him.

I drove past them with my head averted, and followed the cab to Hidalgo Street, along Hidalgo to Main, then south on Main. The railway station lay in that direction, and I half expected Lucy to take a train. Her

cab turned into the circular drive by the station, deposited her and her luggage on the platform. Lucy went into the station. I parked behind it and headed for the back door of the waiting-room. At the same moment, Lucy came out. Her face was heavily powdered, and her hair tucked up under her hat. Without a glance at me, she walked to the taxi rank on the other side of the building and climbed into a black-and-white cab. While its driver was picking up her luggage from the platform, I turned my car.

The black-and-white cab went north on Main to the highway, then west along the highway for two blocks. It slowed and turned sharp left under a canvas sign stretched between two poles: MOUNTVIEW MOTEL AND TRAILER COURT. I drove by it, U-turned at the next intersection, and came back in time to see the black-and-white cab pull out with its back seat empty.

I parked short of the canvas sign and slid to the other side of the seat. The Mountview Motel and Trailer Court stood in the social badlands between the highway and the railroad tracks. It had a view of the mountains in the sense that every building in Bella City had. Through a wire-net fence to which vines clung halfheartedly, I could see twenty or thirty house-trailers lying like beached whales in the dusty court. Around and under them, children and dogs were playing. The near side of the court was half enclosed by an L-shaped building made of concrete blocks, pierced with twelve windows and twelve doors. The first door was marked Office. Lucy's suitcases stood on its low concrete stoop.

Lucy came out, followed by a fat man in a T-shirt. He picked up her suitcases and escorted her to the seventh door, in the corner of the ell. Even at a distance, she looked rigid with strain. The fat man unlocked the door and they went inside.

I drove into the court and parked in front of the office. It was a dismal cubicle, divided by an unpainted wooden counter. A frayed canvas settee stood by the door. On the other side of the counter there was a rolltop desk stuffed with papers, an unmade studio bed, an electric coffeemaker full of grounds, over all a sour coffee smell. A dirty printed card scotch-taped to the top of the counter announced: We Reserve the Right to Choose Our Clientele.

chapter 4

THE FAT MAN came back to the office, his belly rising and falling under the T-shirt. His forearms were marked with blue tattooings like the printing on sides of beef. One on the right arm said: I Love You Ethel. His small eyes said: I love nobody.

"Any vacancies?"

"You kidding? Vacancies is what we got plenty of." He looked around his office as if he suspected something the matter but couldn't exactly place it. "You want a room?"

"Number six if it's empty."

"It ain't."

"How about number eight?"

"You can have eight." He rummaged in the desk for a registration blank, which he pushed across the counter. "You on the road?"

"Uh-huh." I signed my name illegibly, omitting my license number and home address. "Hot today."

"You ain't seen nothing." His defensive tone was accentuated by an asthmatic wheeze. "It's barely a hundred. You should of been here around the first of the month. It was darn near a hundred and ten. That's what keeps the tourists away in droves. The room is two and a half single."

I gave him the money and asked to use the phone.

"Long distance?" he wheezed suspiciously.

"A local call. Private, if you don't mind."

He produced a telephone from under the counter and ambled out, slamming the screen door behind him. I dialed the number of the Mission Hotel. Una's voice answered immediately when the switchboard called her room:

"Who is it?"

"Archer speaking, from the Mountview Motel. Lucy Champion checked in here a few minutes ago. She was evicted by her landlady, a colored woman named Norris on Mason Street."

"Where is this motel?"

"On the highway two blocks west of Main. She's in room seven."

"All right, fine," on a rising note. "Keep a close watch on her. I'm going to pay her a visit. I want to know where she goes after I talk to her."

She hung up. I moved into room eight by placing my overnight bag in the middle of the worn rag rug and hanging my jacket on the one wire hanger in the cardboard wardrobe. The bed was covered with a sleazy green spread that failed to conceal the economic depression in its middle. I didn't trust the bed. I sat on a straight chair that I placed beside the front window and lit a cigarette.

The window gave me a view of Lucy's door and window across the inner corner of the ell. The door was closed, the green roller-blind drawn down over the window. The smoke from my cigarette rose straight up through the stagnant air to the yellow plaster ceiling. A woman groaned behind the wallboard partition in the next room, number nine.

A man's voice said: "Anything the matter?"

"Don't talk."

"I thought something was the matter."

"Shut up. There's nothing the matter."

"I thought I hurt you."

"Shut up. Shut up. Shut up."

My cigarette tasted like burning grass. I butted it in the lid of a coffee can which had been left in the room as an ashtray and thought of the people who had lain alone or in pairs on the iron bed and looked at the yellow ceiling. Traces of their dirt remained in the corners, their odors clung to the walls. They had come from all over the country to look at the yellow ceiling, stir in the iron bed, finger the walls and leave their indelible marks.

I moved across the floor to the partition between my room and Lucy's. She was sobbing. After a while she said something to herself that sounded like: "I won't." And after another while: "I don't know what to do."

People were always sobbing to themselves and saying that they didn't know what to do. Still, it was hard to listen to. I went back to my chair by the window and watched the door, trying to imagine I didn't know what was going on behind it.

Una appeared in front of it suddenly like a figure in a dream. A marijuana dream. She had on leopard-spotted slacks and a yellow silk shirt. Leaning towards the door like an eager fighter, she struck it two backhanded blows with her right fist.

Lucy opened the door. Her curled brown hands came up to her mouth

and hooked on her lower lip. Una pushed in like a small garish battering-ram, and Lucy fell back out of my line of vision. I heard her staggering heels strike the floor. I moved to the partition.

"Sit down," Una said briskly. "No, you sit on the bed. I'll take the chair. Well, Lucy. What have you been doing with yourself?"

"I don't want to talk to you." Lucy's voice might have been soft and pleasant if fear hadn't been playing tricks with it.

"You don't have to get excited."

"I'm not getting excited. What I do is my own business. It's no business of yours."

"I wonder about that. Just what does your business cover?"

"I've been looking for a job, a *decent* job. When I save a little money, I'm going back home. It's not your business, but I'm telling you anyway."

"That's a good thing, Lucy. Because you're not going back to Detroit, now or ever."

"You can't stop me!"

There was an interval of silence. "No, I can't stop you. I will tell you this. When you step off that train, there'll be a reception waiting for you. I phone Detroit long distance every afternoon."

Another, longer pause.

"So you see, Lucy, Detroit is out for you. You know what I think you should do, Lucy? I think you made a mistake leaving us. I think you should come back with us."

Lucy sighed very deeply. "No, I can't."

"Yes. You come back. It'll be safer for you and safer for us, safer for everybody." The bright clatter of Una's tone took on an illusive softness: "I'll tell you what the situation is, dearie. We can't just have you running around loose the way you have been. You'll get into trouble, or you'll have a teensy bit too much to drink in the wrong company, and then you'll blab. I know you people, you see. Blabbermouths every one of you."

"Not me," the girl protested. "I'd never blab, I promise you faithfully. Please leave me go on the way I been, minding my own business, *please*."

"I've got my duty to my brother. I'd like to leave you alone, Lucy. If you'd co-operate."

"I always co-operated before, before it happened."

"Sure you did. Tell me where she is, Lucy. Then I'll leave you alone, or you can come back to us on double the salary. We trust you. It's her we don't trust, you know that. Is she here in town?"

"I don't know," Lucy said.

"You know she's here in town. Now tell me where she is. I'll give you a thousand dollars cash on the barrelhead if you'll tell me. Come on now, Lucy. Tell me."

"I don't know," Lucy said.

"A thousand dollars cash on the barrelhead," Una repeated. "I have it right here."

"I won't take your money," Lucy said. "I don't know where she is."

"Is she in Bella City?"

"I don't know, mum. She brought me here and left. How do I know where she went? She never told me nothing."

"That's funny, I thought you were her regular little confidante." Harshly, with a sudden change of pace: "Was he hurt bad?"

"Yes. I mean, I don't know."

"Where is he? In Bella City?"

"I don't know, mum." Lucy's voice had sunk to a stolid monotone.

"Is he dead?"

"I don't know who you talking about, mum."

"Rotten little liar!" Una said.

I heard a blow. A chair scraped. Someone hiccuped once, loudly.

"You leave me be, Miss Una." The pressure of the situation had thrown Lucy back into sullen nonresistance, and slurred her speech. "I don't have to take nothing from you. I'll call the *pol*lice."

"I'm sorry, honey. I didn't mean to hit you. You know my bad temper, Lucy." Una's voice was husky with false solicitude. "Did I hurt you?"

"You didn't hurt me. You couldn't hurt me. Just stay away from me. Go away and leave me be."

"Why should I?"

"Because you won't get nothing out of me."

"How much are you holding out for, honey?"

"And don't you call me honey. I'm no honey of yours."

"Five thousand dollars?"

"I wouldn't touch your money."

"You're getting pretty uppity for a nigger gal that couldn't get a job until I gave her one."

"Don't you call me that. And you know what you can do with your job. I wouldn't go back to it if I was starving to death."

"Maybe you will," Una said cheerfully. "I hope you do starve to death."

Her footsteps marched to the door, and the door slammed. In the hollow silence that ensued in the room, a series of slow dragging movements ended in the creak of bedsprings and another yawning sigh. I went back to my window. The sky blazed blue in my eyes. At the entrance Una was climbing into a taxi. It went away.

Two cigarettes later, Lucy came out and locked her door with a brass-tagged key. She wavered on the concrete stoop for a moment, gathering

herself like an inexperienced diver for a plunge into cruel space. Thick powder clung like icing sugar to her face, imperfectly masking its darkness and its despair. Though she was wearing the same clothes, her body looked softer and more feminine.

She left the court and turned right along the shoulder of the highway. I followed her on foot. Her steps were quick and uncertain, and I was half afraid she might fall in front of a car. Gradually her stride took on the rhythm of some purpose. At the first traffic-lights, she crossed the highway.

I went ahead of her and ducked into the first store I came to, which happened to be an open-front fruit-and-vegetable market. Bent over a bin of oranges with my back to the street, I heard her heels on the pavement and felt her shadow brush me, like a cold feather.

chapter 5

THE STREET WAS one block west of Main and parallel to it. Its pitted asphalt was lined with Main Street's leavings: radio and shoe repair shops, reupholsterers, insect exterminators, flytrap lunchrooms. A few old houses survived among them as flats and boardinghouses.

Lucy paused in front of a house in the third block and looked up and down the street. A hundred yards behind her, I was waiting at a bus stop on the corner. In a sudden flurry of movement, she ran across the shallow yard of the house and up the veranda steps. I walked on.

The house she had entered leaned with an absent and archaic air between a mattress-cleaning plant and a one-chair barbershop. Three-storied and weirdly gabled, it had been built before the invention of California architecture. Wavy brown watermarks streaked its gray frame sides. The lower panes of the ground-floor windows, painted white, faced the sun like a blind man's frosted glasses. Beside the double front-door there was a name on a board, printed in large black letters: SAMUEL BENNING, M.D. A card above the bell-push said, in English and Spanish, Ring and Enter. I did.

The air in the hallway was a thin hospital-soup compounded of cooking odors, antiseptic, dimness. A face swam at me through it. It was a big man's face, too sharp and aggressive. I shifted my feet instinctively, then saw that it was my own face reflected in murky glass, framed in the tarnished curlicues of a wall mirror.

A door let light in at the end of the hall. A dark-haired woman came through it. She wore the gray striped uniform of a nurse's aide, and she was handsome in a plump and violent way. Her black eyes looked at me as if they knew it. "You wish to see the doctor, sir?"

"If he's in."

"Just go into the waiting-room, sir. He will take care of you presently. The door on your left."

She rolled away on smoothly revolving hips.

The waiting-room was unoccupied. Large and many-windowed, it had evidently been the front parlor of the house. Its present quality was a struggling lack of respectability, from the shredding carpet to the high discolored ceiling. Against the walls there were some wicker chairs that someone had recently brightened up with chintz. And the walls and floor were clean. In spite of this, it was a room in which the crime of poverty had left clues.

I sat down in one of the chairs with my back to the light and picked up a magazine from a rickety table. The magazine was two years old, but it served to mask my face. Across the room from me, in the inner wall, there was a closed door. After a while a tall black-haired woman wearing an ill-fitting white uniform opened the door. I heard a voice that sounded like Lucy's say something unintelligible and emotional, several rooms away. The woman who had opened the door closed it sharply behind her and came towards me:

"Do you wish to see the doctor?"

Her eyes were the color of baked blue enamel. Her beauty canceled the room.

I was wondering how the room had happened to deserve her when she interrupted me: "Did you wish to see the doctor?"

"Yes."

"He's busy now."

"Busy for how long? I'm in a hurry."

"I couldn't say how long."

"I'll wait for a while."

"Very well, sir."

She stood with perfect calm under the pressure of my stare, as if it were her natural element. Her beauty wasn't the kind that depended on movement or feeling. It was plastic and external like a statue's; even the blue eyes were flat and depthless. Her whole face looked as if it had been frozen with novocaine.

"Are you one of Dr. Benning's patients?"

"Not yet."

"Can I have your name, please?"

"Larkin," I said at random. "Horace Larkin."

The frozen face remained frozen. She went to the desk and wrote something on a card. Her tight, lumpy uniform made me restless. Everything about her bothered me.

A bald man in a doctor's smock jerked the inner door open. I raised the magazine in front of me and examined him over its edge. Large-eared

and almost hairless, his head seemed naked, as if it had been plucked. His long face was dimly lit by pale worried eyes. Deep lines of sorrow dragged down from the wings of his large vulnerable nose.

"Come here," he said to the receptionist. "You talk to her, for heaven's sake. I can't make head or tail of it." His voice was high-pitched and rapid, furious with anger or anxiety.

The woman surveyed him coldly, glanced at me, and said nothing.

"Come on," he said placatingly, raising a bony red hand towards her. "I can't handle her."

She shrugged her shoulders and passed him in the doorway. His stringy body cringed away from hers, as if she radiated scorching heat. I left the house.

Lucy came out ten minutes later. I was sitting in the barber shop beside Dr. Benning's house. There were two men ahead of me, one in the chair having his neck shaved, the other reading a newspaper by the window. The newspaper-reader was an unstylish stout in a tan camel's-hair jacket. There were purple veins in his cheeks and nose. When Lucy passed the window heading south, he got up hurriedly, put on a soiled panama, and left the shop.

I waited, and followed him out.

"But you are next, sir," the barber cried after me. I looked back from the other side of the street, and he was still at the window, making siren gestures with a razor.

The man with the veined nose and the panama hat was halfway to the next corner, almost abreast of Lucy. She led us back to the railway station. When she reached it, a passenger train was pulling out towards the north. She stood stock-still on the platform until its smoke was a dissolving haze on the foothills. The man in the camel's-hair coat was watching her, slouched like a barely animate lump of boredom behind a pile of express crates under the baggage-room arch.

Lucy turned on her heel and entered the station. A narrow window under the arch gave me a partial view of the waiting-room. I moved to another window, ignoring the man behind the express crates but trying to place him in my memory. Lucy was at the ticket window with green money in her hand.

The man edged towards me, his stout body wriggling along the wall as if the shade-latticed air offered solid resistance to its movement. He laid two soft white fingers on my arm:

"Lew Archer, *n'est-ce pas?*" The French was deliberate clowning, accompanied by a smirk.

"Must be two other people." I shook the fingers loose.

"You wouldn't brush me, boysie. I remember you but vividly. You

testified for the prosecution in the Saddler trial, and you did a nice job too. I combed the jury panel for the defense. Max Heiss?"

He took off his panama hat, and a shock of red-brown hair pushed out over his forehead. Under it, clever dirty eyes shone liquidly like dollops of brown sherry. His little smile had a shamefaced charm, acknowledging that he had taken a running jump at manhood and still, at forty or forty-five, had never quite got his hands on it. —If it existed, the smile went on to wonder.

"Heiss?" he said coaxingly. "Maxfield Heiss?"

I remembered him and the Saddler trial. I also remembered that he had lost his license for tampering with prospective jurors in another murder trial.

"I know you, Max. So what if I do?"

"So we toddle across the street and I'll buy you a drink and we can talk over old times and such." His words were soft and insinuating, breaking gently like bubbles between his pink lips. His breath was strong enough to lean on.

I glanced at Lucy. She was in a telephone booth at the other end of the waiting-room. Her lips were close to the mouthpiece and moving.

"Thanks, not this time. I have a train to catch."

"You're kidding me again. There isn't another train in either direction for over two hours. Which means you don't have to be anxious the girl will get away, *n'est-ce pas?* She can't possibly use that ticket she just bought for over two hours." His face lit up with a practical joker's delight, as if he had just palmed off an explosive cigar on me.

I felt as if he had. "Somebody's kidding. I'm not in the mood for it."

"Now don't be like that. You don't have to take offense."

"Beat it, Max."

"How can we do business if you won't even bat the breeze?"

"Go away. You're standing in my light."

He waltzed in a small circle and presented his smirk to me again: "*Avee atquee valee,* boysie, that means good-bye and hello. I'm on public property and you can't push me off. And you got no monopoly on this case. If the true facts were known, I bet you don't even know what case you're on. I got a priority on you there."

I couldn't help being interested, and he knew it. His fingers returned like a troupe of trained slugs to my arm:

"Lucy is my meat. I won her in a raffle by dint of sheer personal derring-do. Signed her up for a seven-year contract and just when I'm thinking of converting the deal into cash, lo and behold I stumble into you. In my alcoholic way."

"That was quite a speech, Max. How much truth is there in it?"

"Nothing-but-the-truth-so-help-me-God." He raised his palm in mock solemnity. "Not the whole truth, naturally. I don't know the whole truth and neither do you. We need an exchange of views."

Lucy came out of the telephone booth. Whenever she left an enclosed space her body huddled protectively into itself. She sat down on a bench and crossed her legs, leaning forward as if she had stomach cramps.

Heiss nudged me softly. His moist eyes shone. He might have been confiding the name of his beloved. "I do know there's a great deal of money in it."

"How much?"

"Five grand. I'd be willing to go fifty-fifty with you."

"Why?"

"Simple panic, chum." Unlike most natural liars, he could use the truth effectively. "Hit me and I black out. Shoot me and I bleed. Frighten me and I lose my controls. I'm not the courageous-type. I need a partner who is, one that won't tear me off."

"Or a fall guy?"

"Perish the thought. This is strictly legal, believe me. You don't often pick up twenty-five hundred legally."

"Go on."

"In a minute. *Exchange* of views is what I said. You haven't told me a thing. What tale did the lady tell you, for example?"

"Lady?"

"Woman, dame, whatever she is. The one with the boyish bob and the diamonds. Didn't she hire you?"

"You know everything, Max. How can I tell you something you don't know?"

"You can try. What was her story to you?"

"Something about missing jewels. It wasn't very convincing even at the time."

"Better than the guff she handed me. Do you know what she gave me? That the girl was her late husband's servant, and when he died he left a legacy to her, and she was the executrix of the estate. And oh mercy me I owe it to my poor dead husband to find Lucy and pay off." With a nasty wit, he mimicked Una's accents of false sentiment. "She must have thought she was dealing with an imbecile or something."

"When was this?"

"A week ago. I spent a good solid week picking that black girl up." He shot a vicious glance through the window at Lucy's impervious back. "So I found her, and what happened? I phoned up the good executrix and asked her for further instructions, and she fired me."

"What's she trying to cover up, Max?"

"Are we in business?"

"That depends."

"The hell. I offer you a half interest in a big deal, and you say that depends. *That depends.* I bare my bosom to you, and all you do is play clam. It isn't ethical."

"Is the five grand ethical?"

"I promised you it was. I've been burned, I lost my license once—"

"No blackmail involved?"

"Absolutely not. If you want the honest truth, the thing's so legal I'm afraid of it."

"All right, here's what I think. It isn't Lucy she wants at all. Lucy's a decoy duck for somebody else."

"You catch on rapidly. Do you know who the somebody else is, though?"

"I haven't identified her, no."

"Uh-uh. Not *her.*" He smiled with superior knowledge. "*Him.* I've got his name and description and everything else. And that black babe is going to lead us to him, watch."

Heiss was emotionally carried away. His sherry-brown eyes slopped round in their sockets, and his hands congratulated each other. To me, his story sounded too good to be true. It was.

Lucy straightened suddenly and jumped up from the bench, heading for the back door of the waiting-room. I left Heiss standing. When I turned the rear corner of the station, Lucy was climbing into a green Ford coupé. Alex Norris was at the wheel. The Ford was rolling before the door slammed.

There was one taxi at the stand beside the station. Its driver was sprawled asleep in the front seat, his peaked cap over the upper part of his face, his mouth wide and snoring. Out of the tail of my eye, I saw the Ford turn north toward the highway.

I shook the driver awake. He was little and gray-haired, but he wanted to fight. "Take it easy, for Christ's sake. What goes on?"

I showed him money. "Follow that Ford coupé."

"All right, take it easy."

Max Heiss tried to get in beside me. I shut the door in his face, and the taxi pulled away. We were in the street in time to see the Ford turn left at the highway intersection, towards Los Angeles. At the intersection a red light stopped us. It was a long time before it turned green again. We drove fast out of town, passing everything on the highway. No green Ford.

Five miles beyond the city limits, I told the driver to turn around.

"Sorry," he said. "I couldn't run that light with all the traffic going through. You have trouble with those people?"

"No trouble."

When I got back to the station, Max Heiss had gone. That suited me just as well. I ordered breakfast, always a safe meal, in the station lunchroom, and discovered when I started to eat it that I was hungry.

It was shortly after five o'clock when I finished my bacon and eggs. I walked back to the Mountview Motel.

chapter 6

LUCY'S KEY, with the numbered brass tag dangling from it, was in her door. I obeyed my impulse to knock. There was no answer. I looked around the court, which was sunk in the somnolence and heat of late afternoon. On its far side trailer children were chirping like crickets. I knocked again, listened to answering silence, turned the knob and stepped inside. Lucy was lying almost at my feet. I closed the door and looked at my watch. Five seventeen.

The roller blind was down over the window. Light slanted through the cracks in the blind, supporting a St. Vitus's dance of dust motes. There was a wall switch beside the door, and I jogged it with my elbow. The yellow walls sprang up around me and the ceiling pressed down from overhead, ringed with concentric shadows. The light radiated from a wall bracket directly over Lucy. Its paper-shaded bulb shone down into her face, which was gray as a clay death-mask in a pool of black blood. Her cut throat gaped like the mouth of an unspeakable grief.

I leaned on the door and wished myself on the other side of it, away from Lucy. But death had tied me to her faster than any ceremony.

One of her arms was outflung. Beside the spread upturned hand something metal glinted. I stooped to look at it. It was a handmade knife with a curved six-inch blade and a black wooden handle ornamented with carved leaves. The blade was stained.

I stepped across Lucy towards the bed. It was identical with the bed in my room, its green rayon cover wrinkled where she had lain on it. At its foot her suitcases stood unopened. I opened one of them, using a clean handkerchief to mask my fingerprints. It was neatly packed with nurses' uniforms, crisp and starched from the laundry. Like the private compartment of a divided life, the contents of the other suitcase were a jumbled

mess. It had been packed in a hurry with a tangle of stockings, wadded dresses, soiled blouses and underwear, an *Ebony* and a sheaf of romance magazines, an Ellington album wrapped in red silk pajamas. I found an envelope tucked among the powders and creams in a side pocket.

It was addressed to Miss Lucy Champion, c/o Norris, 14 Mason, Bella City; and postmarked Detroit, Mich., Sept. 9. The letter inside lacked date or return address:

DEAR LUCY

Am very sorry you lost your job we all thot you got youself fixed up for Life but you never know what is going to come, sure we want you back honey can you raze the fair am afraid we cant. You father is out of work agin and am the soul sport of the family again, hard to make ends meat. Can always give you a bed to sleep in honey something to eat, come home things will be better. Brother is still in school doing real good writting this for me (hi sis). Hope you can raze fair stay off the roads.

MOTHER.

P.S.—*How are you sis am fine, you know who.*

I put the letter back where I had found it, and closed the suitcase. Its catch clicked loudly, like a final tick of time.

Lucy's purse lay in a nest of dust in the corner behind her head. It contained lipstick and a handkerchief stained with it, a few ten- and five- and one-dollar bills and some change, a one-way ticket to Detroit, a social security card, and a newspaper clipping. The clipping was printed in old-fashioned type under a single-column head:

MOTHER OFFERS REWARD FOR MISSING MAN

Arroyo Beach, Sept. 8 (Special to the BELLA CITY PRESS.) Mrs. Charles A. Singleton, socialite resident of this resort town, today posted a reward of $5,000 for information concerning the whereabouts of her son. The son, Charles A. Singleton, Jr., disappeared from the public rooms of a local hotel one week ago, on the evening of September 1st. His friends and relatives have not heard from him since that date.

Singleton, a Harvard graduate and wartime Air Force Lieutenant, is of medium height and athletic build, with curly brown hair, hazel eyes and a ruddy complexion. When last seen he was wearing a grey worsted suit, white shirt, dark red tie, and black

shoes, without hat or topcoat. The missing man, son of the late Major Charles A. Singleton, is heir to the Singleton agricultural enterprises. His maternal grandfather was Colonel Isaac Carlyle, who married Maria Valdes, daughter of the founder of the great Valdes land-grant estates.

Local police are inclined to reject suggestions of foul play, though Mrs. Singleton herself expresses fears for her son's safety. County Sheriff Oscar Lanson states: "Kidnapping seems out of the question. There has been no ransom note, for one thing. As for foul play, the evidence indicates that Mr. Singleton left Arroyo Beach under his own power, for his own reasons. It is to be remembered that he is a young, unattached man, with a background of travel. We are, however, doing everything we can to locate him, and will welcome any information from the public."

Anyone having information as to Singleton's whereabouts was urged to contact Capt. Kennedy of the Arroyo Beach sheriff's office.

I read the report twice, fixing the names, times, places, in my head, then replaced the clipping in the purse and the purse in the corner. In a way I knew less than before, as something written in a foreign language extends the range of your ignorance. I looked at my watch. Five twenty-four. Seven minutes since I had found Lucy.

In order to reach the door I had to step over her again. I looked down into the gray face before I switched off the light. Alienated and deeply sunk beyond time already, the face told me nothing. Then it was swallowed by shadows.

In the court, the yellow sunlight looked thin and faded, as if it had been late afternoon for an insupportable time. An old car turned in from the highway and rolled across the gravel to the trailers, leaving a feeble flurry of dust on the stagnant air. I waited for the dust to settle before I started across the court to the office. Before I reached it I saw that Alex Norris was watching me from the gate.

Moving with awkward speed in a pressed blue suit too small for him, he ran at me. I went to meet him and crouched for the onset. He was heavy and strong, and he knew how to use his weight. His shoulder took my midriff and laid me on the gravel on my back. I got up. He didn't know how to use his fists. I stepped inside a wild swing and bent him with a body-blow. It brought his head forward for an uppercut. Instead, to save my knuckles and his face, I locked his right arm and used it as a lever to turn him away.

"Let me go," he said. "Fight fair. I'll show you."

"You showed me. I'm too old to fight. Me and Joe."

"He could beat your brains out," the boy cried defiantly. "Turn me loose, I'll do it myself. What were you doing in Lucy's room?"

"Something's happened to her."

Bowed and immobilized by my hold, he had to crane his neck sideways to look at me. His black forehead was sprinkled with droplets of sweat, and his eyes were large and bright with expectations of disaster. "You're a liar. Let me go."

"Will you stand and talk to me, like a sensible man?"

"No." But the word lacked force. The brightness of his eyes was glazing, would turn to tears in a minute. He was a boy in a man's frame. I released him.

He straightened slowly, rubbing his cramped arm. Beyond him, on the other side of the court, a ragged line of spectators was moving slowly towards the lure of violence.

"Come into the office, Alex."

He stiffened. "Who's going to make me?"

"Nobody's going to make you. Come on, anyway."

"I don't have to."

"How old are you, Alex?"

"Nineteen, going on twenty."

"Ever been in trouble?"

"I never have. Ask my mother."

"Lucy your girl friend?"

"She's not my girl friend. We're going to get married." He added, with pathetic irrelevance: "I can support a wife."

"Sure you can."

His bright gaze was painful on my face. "Is something the matter? Why did you go in there?"

I groped back for the impulse that had made me knock on Lucy's door and go in. "To talk to her. To warn her to leave town."

"We are leaving, tonight. That's what I'm waiting for. She came to get her things." As if it were being turned by a long-handled wrench against his will, his head turned on his shoulders to look at the closed door of number seven. "Why doesn't she come out? Is she sick?"

I said: "She's not coming out."

The gallery of onlookers from the trailers was straggling across the court, uttering small sounds of menace and excitement. I pulled the office door open and held it for Alex. He went in past me, moving nothing but his legs.

The man who loved Ethel and nobody else was sitting on the studio bed with his back to the door, a half-empty Coke bottle in his fist. He rose and padded to the counter, casting a backward glance at the studio bed.

From the cover of a magazine spread open on its pillow, a bare-bosomed woman screamed soundlessly for assistance.

Disregarding her pleas, the pink-haired man said: "What can I do for you?" Then his slow nerves reacted to the black boy: "What does he want?"

"The telephone," I said.

"Local call?"

"The police. Do you know the number?"

He knew it. "Trouble?"

"In number seven. Go and take a look. I wouldn't go in, though. Don't let the others, either."

He leaned on the counter, his belly oozing over its edge like cottage cheese in a bag. "What happened?"

"Look for yourself. Give me the telephone first."

He handed me the telephone, hustled to the door and out. Alex tried to follow him. I kept my right hand on the boy's arm and dialed with my left. When he heard what I had to say to the desk sergeant he fell forward across the counter, catching his weight on his forearms. The upper half of his body was shaken by an inaudible sobbing. The desk sergeant said that he would send a car right out.

I shifted my hand to the boy's back. He shied away from it as if I were trying to stab him.

"What were you doing out there, Alex?"

"Minding my own business."

"Waiting for Lucy?"

"If you know, you don't have to ask me."

"How long were you waiting?"

"Nearly half an hour. I drove around the block a couple of times and came back."

I looked at my watch: five thirty-one. "She went in about five o'clock?"

"It was just about five."

"Did she go in alone?"

"Yes. Alone."

"Did anybody else go in afterwards?"

"Not that I saw."

"Did anybody come out?"

"You did. I saw you come out."

"Besides me. Before me."

"I didn't see. I drove around the block."

"Did you go in?"

"No, sir. I didn't go in."

"Why not?"

"She said she'd only be five minutes. Her bags, they were still packed."

"You could have gone in."

"I didn't want to. She didn't want me to."

"Lucy was passing, wasn't she?"

"What if she was? There is no law against passing in this state."

"You're well informed," I said. "Going to school?"

"I just started junior college. But I'm quitting."

"To get married?"

"I'll never get married. I'll never marry anybody now. I'll run away and lose myself." With his head dejected below his shoulders, he was speaking to the scarred top of the counter.

"You're going to have to stick around and answer a lot of questions. Pull yourself together."

I shook him roughly by the shoulder. He wouldn't turn or move until the siren whooped on the highway. Then his head came up like an animal's at bay.

chapter 7

A BLACK PATROL-CAR ground to a stop on the gravel outside the office. A plainclothesman got out, mounted the stoop, and filled the doorway. In spite of his gray fedora and baggy gray clothes, he looked as if he had always been a policeman—had teethed on handcuffs, studied his lessons in the criminal code, pounded out his career on broken pavements, in nocturnal alleys. Scarred and seamed by fifty years of sun and other weather, his face was a relief map of life in the valley.

"I'm Brake, lieutenant of detectives. You the one that phoned?"

I said I was. "She's in room seven, at the end of the court."

"Dead?"

"Very."

Alex let out a choked noise. Brake took a step towards him and looked him over closely. "What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for Lucy."

"She the one that's dead?"

"Yes, sir."

"You're going to have a long wait. Did you cut her?"

Alex looked at the detective as if he were a tree too thick to climb. "No, sir."

"You're Annie Norris's boy, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"How's your mother going to like this?" Before Alex could answer, Brake turned to me: "Did he cut her?"

"I doubt it. He stayed around after it happened. They were on their way to get married, he says."

"He says."

"I didn't cut her," Alex said. "I wouldn't hurt a hair of Lucy's head."

He was leaning slackly against the counter on his elbows, as if he no longer had a use for his body.

The fat key-clerk came in, letting the door close softly on his heel. He moved sideways along the wall and around the end of the counter to his world of paper bosoms, dirty sheets, silent screams for assistance. The sight of death had reminded him of the buried guilts in the graveyard of his mind, and he jumped when Brake said to his back:

"Are you the key-clerk?"

"Yes, sir."

"I want a key to number seven, all the keys in fact."

"They're both out, Mr. Brake." He came forward placatingly, offering his quivering body as a sacrifice. "I give her one when she rented the room, and then when she came back she asked me for the duplicate. She said she lost the other. I said she'd have to pay—"

I cut in: "The key's in the door, lieutenant."

"Why didn't you say so?"

Brake stepped outside and summoned his driver to keep an eye on Alex. A second police-car drew up behind the first. The ring of spectators broke and re-formed around it. A uniformed sergeant pushed through them to join Brake. He had a folded tripod and camera under one arm and a fingerprint kit in the other hand. "Where's the stiff, lieutenant?"

"Over yonder. Call the deputy coroner?"

"He's on his way."

"She'll spoil before we get to her, at this rate. Now take it easy, folks. Gangway."

The crowd made way for them and surged in their wake.

Inside the office, Alex and his guard sat in glum intimacy on the settee. The guard was a large young cop in a blue traffic-officer's uniform. Beside his thick-chested frame Alex looked smaller and thinner. His gaze was turned inward. He seemed to be seeing himself for the first time as he was: a black boy tangled in white law, so vulnerable he hardly dared move a muscle.

Behind the counter, the key-clerk was comforting himself with the remnant of his Coke. I sat on the studio bed beside him:

"I'd like to get that straight about the keys."

"Questions!" He belched pathetically. Brown liquid trickled from the corner of his mouth into a red rash on his chin. "You prob'ly won't believe me, I look like a healthy constitution, only I got delicate nerves. I'm still on partial disability from the Army, and that's the proof of it. I can't take all this cross-questioning and stuff. The way the lieutenant looked at me, you'd think I done her in." He pouted like a bloated dilapidated imbecile little boy.

"When did you see her last?"

"Must of been around five o'clock, I didn't look at the time."

"She needed another key?"

"That's correct. I asked her what happened to the one I give her when she checked in. She said she must of lost it. I said that would be fifty cents extra and she paid me the money right then. She said she was checking out. Little did I know she had a rendezvoose with murder."

"Did she seem disturbed?"

"I don't know. I didn't specially notice. I was the one that should of been disturbed. Why'd she want to come here to get herself chopped? They'd do it for her down on Hidalgo any day of the week."

"It certainly was tough on you," I said, "and inconsiderate of her."

"You're bloody right." Self-pity gurgled in his throat like a hemorrhage beyond the reach of irony or cautery. "How did I know she was passing herself for white? That she was going to bleed all over my floor? I got to clean it up."

On the other side of the counter Alex sat with his guard. All I could see of him was the top of his head, but I could hear him breathing.

"After the girl went into her room," I said, "did anybody else go in?"

"Not that I saw. I don't pay no attention half the time. They go and come." The phrase pleased him, and he repeated: "Go and come."

"You didn't see anybody?"

"Naw. I was sitting down in here passing the time. They come and go." A flash of anger galvanized him feebly: "I *wisht* I seen him. Just lemme get my hands on the guy that done it and mussed that floor—"

"You think it was a man?"

"Who said so?"

"You said 'guy.'"

"Only a manner of speaking. Anyway, why would a woman cut a woman?" Leaning towards me, he said in a loud stage whisper: "You want my honest opinion, I think that young buck done it. They're always cutting their wenches, you know that."

There was a scuffle of feet. Alex Norris came over the counter head first and lighted on all fours in front of us. Scrambling to his feet, he landed one back-handed blow on the side of the clerk's head. The clerk screamed gently and swooned across my legs.

Alex dived for the open window. Unable to get to my feet, I yelled: "Stop it, Alex! Come back!"

He kicked out the screen and hoisted one leg over the sill. The coat of his blue suit was split down the back.

His guard strode round the end of the counter, lifting the right side of his uniform blouse. His black police-holster snapped open and a revolver

popped up in his hand like a lethal jack-in-the-box. Its safety clicked off. Alex was still in the window, struggling to force his other leg through the narrow opening. He was a sitting duck, and the range was almost point-blank.

I rolled the key-clerk off my knees to the floor and stepped across the line of fire. The trigger-happy guard cursed me and said: "Get out of the way."

Alex was out of the window. I went out after him. He was pounding across a field of tall dry grass towards the fence that ran along the highway. It was a seven-foot wire fence. He ran up it and vaulted over in a single fluid motion. His Ford coupé was parked on the shoulder of the highway.

I got over the fence and fell on the other side. A gun went off behind me. Alex was in his car, kicking the starter. A bullet struck the hood of the Ford with the plop of a heavy raindrop, leaving a hole. As if stung, the Ford jumped forward, its rear wheels churning the gravel. I ran for it and got one arm hooked through the open right window.

Alex didn't turn his head over the wheel, but he braked suddenly, swerved, and accelerated. I lost my precarious grip on the door. When I hit the ground, I rolled. The colored world spun into gray monochrome and blacked out for a second. The young traffic-cop with the gun hauled me to my feet. The Ford was out of sight.

"Listen, you." He cursed me unimaginatively a few times. "I could of pinked him, if you hadn't been in the way. What you trying to pull?" The revolver in his right hand seemed to be threatening me. His left hand was automatically brushing gravel off the back of my jacket.

"You wanted him alive. If you shot him you'd be in the soup. He wasn't under arrest."

His face went white under the tan, as if I had turned a valve on its blood supply. Almost furtively, he put the revolver away.

Brake came out through the gate of the court, running swiftly and cumbrously like a bear on its hind legs. He had grasped the situation before he reached us:

"You're wasting time, Trencher. Take after him. Use the other car. I'll get on the radio. What's his number?"

"I didn't get it, lieutenant."

"You're doing great work, Trencher." Brake waved him away.

I gave him the license number. Moving with alert impatience, Brake went back to the patrol-car and shut himself in to radio his headquarters. I waited for him beside it:

"What's the story, lieutenant?"

"General alarm. Roadblocks." He started for Lucy's room.

The crowd of trailer people, men and women and children, blocked his path. One of the men spoke up: "The boy get away from you, captain?"

"We'll get him back. Incidentally, I want all you people to stay home tonight. We'll talk to you later."

"Is it murder?" The question fell into a hush, which was broken by a sparrowlike twittering from women and children.

"I'll guarantee this:" Brake said, "she didn't cut herself shaving. Now break it up. You people go back to your houses."

The crowd drew back muttering. Advised by his glance to come along, I followed Brake to the door of number seven. Inside, the identification officer was taking measurements and photographs. Lucy lay under his ministrations with the bored expression of a hostess whose guests' antics were getting out of hand.

"Come in," Brake said. "Shut the door."

One of the suitcases was open on the bed, and he returned to his examination of it. I stayed by the door, watching his large practiced hands go through the white uniforms.

"Trained nurse, apparently." He added very casually: "How did you happen to find her?"

"I knocked on the door and she didn't answer. The door wasn't locked. I looked in."

"Why do that?"

"I'm in the room next door."

His narrow gray gaze came up to my face. "You know her?"

"Never met her."

"Hear any noise? See anybody?"

"No." I made a quick decision: "I'm a private detective from Los Angeles. I've been tailing her since noon."

"Well." The gray eyes clouded. "That makes it interesting. Why were you doing that?"

The identification man, who was dusting the second suitcase for fingerprints, turned his head to give me a sharp-faced look.

"I was hired to."

Brake straightened up and faced me. "I didn't think you were doing it for fun. Let's see your identification."

I showed him my photostat.

"Who hired you?"

"I don't have to answer that."

"You weren't hired to kill her, by any chance?"

"You'll have to do better than that, if you want any cooperation from me."

"Who said I wanted any co-operation from you? Who hired you?"

"You get tough very quickly, lieutenant. I could have blown when I found her, instead of sticking around to give you the benefit of my experience."

"Can the spiel." He didn't needle easily. "Who hired you? And for God's sake don't give me the one about you got your client's interests to protect. I got a whole city to protect."

We faced each other across the drying moat of blood. He was a rough small-city cop, neither suave nor persuasive, with an ego encysted in scar-tissue. I was tempted to needle him again, to demonstrate to these country cousins how a boy from the big city could be hard in a polished way. But my heart wasn't in the work. I felt less loyalty to my client than to the dead girl on the floor, and I compromised:

"A woman who gave her name as Una Larkin came to my office this morning. She hired me to tail this girl, and told me where to find her at lunchtime. Tom's Café on Main Street. I picked her up there and followed her home to Alex Norris's house, where she was a roomer—"

"Save the details for your statement," Brake said. "What was that about the client's name? You think it was a phony?"

"Yes. Am I going to make a statement?"

"We'll go downtown soon's we finish up here. Right now I want to know what she hired you for."

"She said Lucy worked for her, and left a couple of weeks ago with some of her jewelry—ruby earrings and a gold necklace."

Brake glanced at the identification man, who wagged his head negatively. He said to me: "You'll have to take it up with the County Administrator. Or is that story phony, too?"

"I think so."

"The woman live in town here?"

"I doubt it. She was very cagy about who she was and where she came from."

"You giving it straight, or suppressing information?"

"Straight." Una had bought that much with the hundred that was lonely in my wallet.

"It better be. Did you call us as soon as you found her?"

"There was a few minutes' time-lag. On my way across the court to the office, young Norris attacked me."

"Was he going or coming?"

"Neither. He was waiting."

"How do you know?"

"I held him and questioned him a little. He said he'd been waiting for Lucy to get her things since five o'clock. They were going away to be married. He didn't know she was dead until I told him."

"You read minds, huh?" Brake's face slanted, chin out, towards me, cracked and red like Bella Valley earth above the irrigation level. "What else do you do, Mister Experience?"

"When I make a statement, I try to keep the record straight. The physical facts are against Norris. It looks like consciousness of guilt, running out like that—"

"You don't tell me," Brake said heavily, and his assistant snickered. "I never would have thought of that by myself."

"He ran because he was scared. He thought he was going to be railroaded, and maybe he was right. I've seen it happen to black boys, also to white boys."

"Oh sure, you've been around. You've had a lot of experience. Only I don't want the goddam benefit of your goddam experience. I want your facts."

"You're getting them. Maybe I'm going too fast for your powers of assimilation."

Brake's small eyes crossed slightly. His large face became congested with dark blood. The developing situation was interrupted by someone opening the door behind me, and singing out: "Break it up, boys. I have a date with a lady. Where's the lady?"

It was the deputy coroner, a plump young medical man bubbling with the excessive cheerfulness of those who handled death as a regular chore. He was accompanied by a white-coated ambulance driver and a black-coated undertaker who strove to outdo him in gaiety. Brake lost interest in me and my selection of facts.

Samples of blood were taken from the floor. The stained bolo knife and Lucy's smaller belongings were packed in evidence cases. Its position having been outlined with chalk, the body was lifted onto a stretcher and covered with canvas. The undertaker and the ambulance driver carried it out. Brake sealed the door.

It was twilight, and the courtyard was almost empty. Around a pole in its center, a group of women stood in the spill of light from a single arc-lamp. They were talking in loud self-righteous tones about murders they had seen or read or heard about or imagined. Their voices sank to an uneasy protesting murmur as Lucy's cortege went by them. Their eyes, bright-dark in faces splashed with white by the lamp on the pole, followed the covered stretcher to the back door of the waiting hearse. The sky was a dingy yellow ceiling.

chapter 8

THE MISSION HOTEL was the most impressive building on Main Street. It was a concrete cube pierced with four rows of windows and surmounted by a broadcasting mast that thrust a winking red light towards the stars. Its flat white façade was stained red by a vertical neon sign over the entrance.

The lobby was deep and gloomy, furnished with dark wrinkled-leather chairs. Those near the half-curtained windows at the front were occupied by old men sitting in stiff impromptu positions, as if a flood had lodged them there years ago and then receded forever. On the wall above their heads, an obscure mural depicted U.S. cavalrymen riding strange horses with human knees in pursuit of still stranger Indians.

The desk-clerk was a mouse-colored little man who was striving against heavy odds to confer distinction on himself and his surroundings. With hair and eyebrow-moustache scrupulously brushed, a cornflower in his buttonhole matching the delicate pin-stripe in his flannels, and at his languid elbow a vase of cornflowers to underline his point, he might have inspired a tone poem by Debussy. He answered my question in tones of careful elegance, implying that he hadn't always manned an outpost in the wilderness:

"I believe Mrs. Larkin is in her suite. I haven't seen her go out, sir. Whom shall I say is calling?"

"Archer. Don't bother announcing me. What's her room number?"

"One hundred and two, Mr. Archer. I think she's expecting you."

It was opposite the elevator on the second floor. At the end of the corridor a pair of curtained French doors had a red-lit sign above them: FIRE ESCAPE. I knocked on the door of 102. The elevator creaked and thumped behind me like an old heart running down.

A wan voice called through the door: "Who is it, anyway?"

"Archer."

"Come in."

The door was locked, and I said so.

"All right, all right, I'm coming." The door swung inward.

Una looked sick. The olive-drab patches under her eyes had darkened and spread. In red Japanese pajamas she looked less like a woman than a sexless imp who had grown old in hell.

She stood back to let me enter the room and closed the door softly behind me. It was the sitting-room of the bridal or gubernatorial suite, if honeymooners or politicians ever came there. The two tall windows that overlooked the street had drapes of dark-red plush. They were lit from outside by a red neon glow that competed with the light of a parchment-shaded floor lamp made of twisted black iron. The tall carved Spanish chairs looked unsat in and unsittable. The only trace of Una's occupancy was a leopard coat hanging over the back of a chair.

"What's the trouble?" I said to her back.

She seemed to be supporting herself on the doorknob. "No trouble. It's this foul heat, and the waiting and the uncertainty." She saw where that was leading her, into candor, and switched off the little-girl whine. "I have a migraine, God bless it. They hit me regularly."

"Too bad." I added, with deliberate tactlessness: "I have a headache myself."

She turned on me with a hypochondriac's fierce competitive smile. "Not migraine, I bet. If you haven't had migraine you don't know what it is. I wish I could have my head amputated. Wouldn't that be stylish, though, a headless torso strutting around?" She was making an effort to master her self-pity and carry it off as a joke. "Men wouldn't know the difference."

Una was flattering herself again. Even in lounging pajamas, her torso was no more interesting or curvilinear than a brick. I backed into one of the unsittable chairs, and said: "You're a great admirer of men."

"They're an admirable race. Well?" She stood above me, her changed tone indicating that there was no more time for comedy.

"I have a report to make. Why don't you sit down?"

"If you say so." The chair was too big for her, and her feet dangled clear of the floor. "Go ahead."

"Before I do, there are a couple of matters that need straightening out."

"What does that mean?" The pain behind her tongue gave it a vicious twang.

"You lied once to me this morning, about the theft of some jewelry. It's possible that you lied twice."

"Are you calling me a liar?"

"I'm asking you."

"You've been talking to her."

"Not exactly. Is that what I'd find out if I had? That you're a liar?"

"Don't put words into my mouth, I don't like it. I gave you the reason I had for wanting Lucy followed."

"The second time."

"The second time, then."

"You didn't say very much."

"Why should I? I've got a right to some privacy."

"You had this morning. Not any more."

"What is this?" she asked the room in perplexity. Her hands twisted, and their diamonds caught and reflected red light from the window. "I pay a man a hundred dollars to do a job for me, so he wants to know my grandfather's middle name. It was Maria, curiously enough."

"You're very frank about things that don't count. But you haven't given me your own name yet. I don't even know where you live."

"If it was any of your business, I'd tell you. Who do you think you are?"

"Merely an ex-cop trying to hustle a living. I sell my services on the open market. It doesn't mean I have to sell them to anybody."

"That's tall talk for a peeper. I can buy and sell you twenty times over—"

"Not me. You should have taken my advice and gone to the classifieds. There are bums you can hire for fifteen dollars a day to do anything short of murder. Murder comes higher."

"What about murder? Who said anything about murder?" Her voice had dwindled suddenly to a bodiless whisper that buzzed and wavered like a mosquito's flight.

"I did. I said it was expensive, in more ways than one."

"But why bring it up, what's the point? You haven't been talking to anybody? One of these bums you mentioned?"

She was thinking of Maxfield Heiss. I said I hadn't.

"Not Lucy?"

"No."

"But you have been staying close to her?"

"As close as possible."

"Where is she? Where did she go?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know! I paid you good money to tail her. That was the whole point."

She slid off the chair and faced me with clenched fists. I was ready to catch them if she flung herself on me. Instead, she used them on herself,

beating her bony flanks in staccato rhythm. "Has everybody gone crazy?" she yelped at the ceiling.

"Settle down. You sound as if you have. I wouldn't put homicidal mania past you—"

"Homicidal mania!" Her voice rose to the narrow limit of its range, and broke. "What about homicidal mania? You *have* been talking to Lucy."

"No. I overheard you talking to her, though, this afternoon. I didn't like the sound of it. There's violence in my business but I don't like cold-blooded violence, or people who threaten other people with it."

"Oh. That." She looked relieved. "I slapped her face for her, not very hard. She had it coming."

"Tell me more."

"You can go to hell."

"Later, perhaps. Before I kiss you good-bye, I want some information. Who you are, where you came from, why you were after Lucy. Also what you were doing at five o'clock this afternoon. We'll start with that."

"Five o'clock? I was right here, in this room. Is it important?" The question was neither rhetorical nor defiant like most of her other questions. She knew or sensed what was coming.

"Never mind that. Can you prove it?"

"If I have to. I made a telephone call around five." Her hands were moving over and over each other, trying to warm themselves at the cold fire of the diamonds. "I wouldn't want to use that unless I have to. You haven't even told me what it is I need an alibi for."

"Who were you calling?"

"You wouldn't be interested. I said I can prove it if I have to. It was long distance. They keep a record." She retreated to a leather hassock and crouched uneasily on its edge.

"I'm interested in everything about you, Una. A little while ago I made a statement to the police, and I couldn't leave you out."

"You went to the cops?" Her voice was incredulous, as if I had leagued myself with the forces of evil.

"They came to me. I found Lucy with her throat cut shortly after five o'clock."

"Did you say throat cut?"

"I did. She was dead in her motel room. I had to explain what I was doing there. Naturally your name came up—the name you're using."

"Why aren't they here?"

"I didn't tell them you were in town. I thought, before I threw you to them, I'd give you a chance to level. I'm also a little curious about who I'm sticking my neck out for, and why."

"You sap! They might have followed you here."

"Sap is the word." I stood up. "I haven't thought of a word for you, but I will."

"Where are you going?"

"Down to the station to amplify my statement. The longer I wait, the more trouble it's going to make for me."

"No, you can't do that." She scrambled to her feet and ran jerkily to the door, spreading her arms across it like a crucified marionette. "You're working for me. You can't turn me in."

I took the hundred from my wallet and tossed it at her feet. She stooped for it, watching me anxiously to see that I didn't escape:

"No. Please take it back. I'll give you more."

"You haven't got enough. Murder comes very high on my price-list."

"I didn't kill her, you—Mr. Archer. I told you my alibi."

"Telephone alibis are easy to fix."

"I didn't fix it. There's no way I could have fixed it. I was here in this room. Ask the switchboard. I haven't been out of here since early this afternoon."

"And that's why you're taking it so calmly, eh?" I reached for the doorknob.

"What are you going to do?"

Her cold hand closed over mine. The bill fell like a crumpled green leaf to the floor. Braced against the door, breathing with terrier quickness, she didn't notice it.

"I'll see the switchboard girl, if the same one's still on duty."

"It was the desk-clerk who handled the call. I recognized his voice."

"All right, I'll talk to the desk-clerk. Then you and I are going into this thing in detail."

"Not with cops?"

"It's up to you. We'll see how your story checks."

"No. Stay here. You can't do this to me." The words were punctuated by gasping breaths.

I turned the knob and pulled on it. She sat down against the door and began to scream wordlessly. The opening door pushed her sideways. Legs spraddled, mouth wide open, she looked up at me in the reddish murderous light and I looked down at her. She was making a steady unbearable sound like the screech of tearing metal. I closed the heavy door, cutting off the sound.

The desk-clerk beamed with pleasure at the sight of me. I was the fortunate traveler whose lady-friend in the expensive suite wore genuine leopardskin and probable diamonds.

"I'm looking after things for Mrs. Larkin," I said. "May I see her room account?"

"Certainly, sir." Plucking a large card from a filing drawer beside him, he leaned confidentially across the polished counter top. "I do hope Mrs. Larkin isn't checking out. She tips quite beautifully. It's good for general morale among the help." His voice sank to a bashful murmur: "She isn't a Hollywood personality, by any chance?"

"I'm surprised she told you."

"Oh, she didn't *tell* me. I deduced it. I recognize real class. Of course I did have a clue."

His polished oval fingernail pointed to the top of the card. Una had given the Hollywood-Roosevelt Hotel as her home address. Below it, only three items were listed on the account: twelve dollars for the suite, which had been paid in advance; a telephone charge of $3.35; and $2.25 for room service.

"She's been here less than one full day," I said in a penny-pinching way. "Three thirty-five seems like a lot of money for phone calls."

His small mustache rose towards his nostrils as if it was about to be inhaled. "Oh no, it's perfectly legitimate. It was all one call, long distance and person-to-person. I took care of it myself."

"Isn't that unusual?"

"I wish it were. The daytime operator goes off at five, and the night operator was a little late. I was at the switchboard myself when Mrs. Larkin called down."

"At five?"

"Maybe one or two minutes after. I'd just sat down in front of the board that minute. Switchboards have always fascinated me."

"You're sure it was Mrs. Larkin?"

"Oh, absolutely. Her voice is quite unique. Is she an actress of some kind, a character actress?"

"You're quite acute," I said. "She is also a character in her own right. It's hard to believe she'd spend that much money on a single phone call."

"Just ask her!" He was cut to the quick, which was very near the surface. "Go and ask her."

"Mrs. Larkin doesn't like to be bothered with these trivial details. She employs me to protect her from them, in fact. Now, if it was a call to Detroit, I could understand it."

"Ypsilanti," he said eagerly. "It was to the Tecumseh Tavern in Ypsilanti. That's right outside Detroit, isn't it?"

I assumed a thoughtful expression. "Let's see now, who does Mrs. Larkin know in Ypsilanti?"

"His name was Garbold. She asked for a man called Garbold, person-to-person." But his eagerness was beginning to fade at the edges. He looked down at his vase of cornflowers as if he suspected that noxious insects might be concealed among them.

"Of course. Garbold. Why didn't you say so? There's no trouble there. Mrs. Larkin will take care of it." I scrawled my initials at the bottom of the card and left him quickly.

Una had been quicker. I knocked once on her door and got no answer. What I got was the feeling you get when you go to a great deal of trouble to hit yourself a sharp blow at the base of the skull with a rubber hammer.

The door wasn't locked. The leopard coat was gone from the back of the chair. Bedroom and bathroom were as clean as a whistle. I left as Una had, by the fire escape.

In the alley behind the hotel, a woman in a shawl and a dragging black skirt was hunched over an open garbage-can. She looked up at me from an infinite network of wrinkles.

"Did a lady come down here? In a spotted coat?"

The ancient woman removed something from her mouth's eroded crater. I saw it was a red steak-bone she had been gnawing. "*Si.*" she said.

"Which way did she go?"

She raised the bone without speaking, and pointed up the alley. I dropped the change from my pocket into her mummified hand.

"*Muchas gracias, señor.*" Her black Indian gaze came from the other side of history, like light from a star a thousand years away.

The alley led to the hotel garage. Mrs. Larkin had taken her car out within the last five minutes. It was a new Plymouth station-wagon. No, they didn't keep track of license numbers. Probably she'd left a forwarding address at the desk. Try there.

chapter 9

I CLIMBED THE oil-stained concrete ramp to the sidewalk and stood at its edge, undecided what to do. I had no client, no good leads, not much money. Regret for Una's hundred-dollar bill was gnawing at me already, like a small hungry stomach ulcer. The crowd went by like a kaleidoscope continually stirred, in which I only just failed to discern a pattern.

It was an early Saturday-night crowd. Farmhands in jeans and plaid shirts, soldiers in uniforms, boys in high-school windbreakers, roved singly and in pairs and packs among women of all ages and all shades. Hard-faced women in hats towed men in business suits. Ranchers hobbling in high-heeled boots leaned on their sun-faded wives. Under the winking yellow lights at the intersection, long shiny cars competed for space and time with pickup trucks, hot-rods, migrant jalopies. My car was still in the court of the Mountview Motel. I stepped out into the crowd and let it push me south, towards the highway.

Above the highway corner there was a cigar store with a pay-telephone sign. Under the sign a quartet of Mexican boys were watching the world go by. They leaned in a row, one-legged like storks, their lifted heels supported by the windowsill of the shop, displaying mismatched fluorescent socks under rolled jeans. Keep Your Feet on the Sidewalk Please was lettered on the wall beside them in vain.

I detached myself from the crowd and went in through the shop to the telephone booth at the rear. Three taxi-drivers were shooting craps on the back counter. I looked up Dr. Samuel Benning's number in the local directory, and dialed it. At the other end of the line the phone rang twenty times. My nickel jangled in the coin return with the fanfare of a silver-dollar jackpot.

Before I reached the front door a young woman passed the window, walking south by herself. The four boys sprang into a burlesque routine. The one at the end pushed the one beside him, who almost caromed with the woman. He recovered his balance and rumpled the ducktail haircut of the third, who punched the fourth in the stomach. They staggered around in front of the entrance, breathless with simulated laughter.

I pushed out through them. The woman looked back in disdain. Though she had changed her striped gray uniform for a white batiste blouse and a white skirt, I recognized her face. She was the plump dark-eyed woman who had directed me into Dr. Benning's waiting-room. The back of my neck began to itch where the bitch goddess coincidence had bitten me before.

The woman walked on, switching her red-ribboned horsetail of black hair above the soft round rotation of her hips. I followed her, with compunction. She reminded me of Lucy for some reason, though she was wide and low-slung where Lucy had been lean and high-stepping. She walked, with a similar air of knowing where she was going, into the section in which I had first seen Lucy. When she crossed the street and entered Tom's Café, my compunction turned acute.

She paused inside the glass door to get her bearings. Then she set her course for one of the rear booths. A man was sitting in the booth with his back to the door. His panama hat showed above the low plyboard partition. He rose to greet her, buttoning his camel's-hair jacket, and stood above her in an attitude of delight while she inserted her hips between the seat and the table. As a final mark of devotion he removed his hat and smoothed his stubbly shock of brown hair with fat white fingers, before he sat down opposite her. Max Heiss was exerting charm.

I went to the bar, which covered the whole left wall of the café. The booths along the opposite wall were full, and the bar was packed with Saturday-night drinkers: soldiers and shrill dark girls who looked too young to be there, hard-faced middle-aged women with permanented hair, old men renewing their youth for the thousandth time, asphalt-eyed whores working for a living on drunken workingmen, a few fugitives from the upper half of town drowning one self to let another self be born. Behind the bar a hefty Greek in an apron dispensed fuel, aphrodisiac, opiate, with a constant melancholy smile.

I ordered a short rye and took it standing, keeping an eye on Heiss in the bar mirror. He was leaning far over the table towards the dark-eyed woman, and she was registering pleasant shock.

The booth behind him was vacated, and I crossed to it before the table was cleared. The room was surging with noise. A juke box bawled above the babel of tongues at the bar. An electric shuffleboard beside the liquor counter at the front gave out machine-gun bursts of sound at intervals. I

propped myself in the corner of the seat with my ear pressed to the plyboard. A yard away, Heiss was saying:

"I been thinking about you all day, dreaming about those great big beautiful eyes. I been dreaming about those great big beautiful etcetera, too, sitting and dreaming about 'em. You know what an etcetera is, Flossie?"

"I can guess." She laughed, like somebody gargling syrup. "You're a great kidder. Incidently, my name isn't Flossie."

"Florie, then, what does it matter? If you were the only girl in the world, which is what you pradically are as far as I'm concerned, what does it matter? You're the girl for me. But I bet you've got plenty of boy friends." I guessed that Max had been drinking all day, and had reached the point where anything he said sounded like poetry set to music.

"I bet I have, not. Anyways, it's no business of yours, Mr. Desmond. I hardly know you." But she knew the game.

"Come on over on this side and get to know me better, kid. Florie. Sweet name for a sweet kid. Did anybody ever tell you you got a mouth like a flower, Florie?"

"You certny got a line, Mr. Desmond."

"Aw, call me Julian. And come on over. I warn you it isn't safe. When I get close up to a great big beautiful etcetera, I want to take a bite out of it, I warn you."

"You hungry or something?" I heard the rustle and creak of the girl's movement into the near seat. "Incidently, Julian, I'm kind of hungry. I could eat something."

"*I'm* going to eat *you.*" Max's voice was muffled. "I guess I better fatten you up first, huh? You want a steak, and something to drink? After that, who knows? *Quien sabe*, isn't that how you say it?"

"I only talk American," she answered him severely. Having established that, she relaxed again: "A steak will be swell, Julian. You're a real fun guy."

Heiss hailed the waitress. She crossed the room, a lank henna-head mincing on tender feet. "What'll it be?"

"A steak for the little lady. I've already dined myself."

"Let's see, you're drinking sherry."

"Very dry sherry," said Desmond-Heiss.

"Sure, very dry." She turned her head to one side and threw the line away: "Maybe you take it in powder form."

"An Alexander for me," the girl said.

"Sure, kiddie, have yourself a time." But there was an undertone in his voice, the no-expense-account blues. "Nothing's too good for Florie."

A woman came in from the street and walked quickly along the row of booths. Her wide-shouldered black coat swung out behind with the energy

of her movement and showed the white uniform underneath. She didn't see me but I saw her and straightened up in my seat. She stopped beside Heiss and Florie, her blue eyes glittering in her cold porcelain face.

"Hello, Mrs. Benning. You want to see me?" Florie's voice was small and tinny.

"You didn't finish your work. You can come and finish it now."

"I did do my work, Mrs. Benning. Everything you said."

"Are you contradicting me?"

"No, but it's Saturday night. I got a right to my Saturday nights. When do I get a chance to have some fun?"

"Fun is one thing. What you're doing is peddling my private affairs to a dirty snooper."

"What's that?" Heiss put in brightly. "I beg your pardon, lady?"

"Don't 'lady' me. Are you coming, Florie?" The woman's voice was low, but it hummed like an overloaded electric circuit.

"I hope there ain't no trouble, ma'am," the waitress said briskly behind her.

Mrs. Benning turned to look at her. I didn't catch the look, because the back of her dark head was towards me. The waitress backed away, holding the menu card as if to shield her chest.

Heiss stood up, not quite so tall as she was. "I don't know who you are, lady. I can tell you this, you got no call to molest my girl friend in public." His face was groping for an attitude. Then his liquid gaze met hers and drooled away.

She leaned towards him, talking in a low buzzing monotone: "I know who you are. I saw you watching the house. I heard you talking to Florie on the office extension. I'm warning you: stay away from her, and especially stay away from me."

"Florie has a right to her friends." Heiss had found a manner, that of man-of-the-world, but it went bad immediately. "As for you, Mrs. Benning, if that's what you call yourself, I wouldn't touch you. I wouldn't buy you for cat's-meat—"

She laughed in his face: "You'd never have the chance, little man. Now crawl back down your hole. If I ever see you again, I'll knock you over with a stick the way I would a gopher. Come on, Florie."

Florie sat head down with her arms on the table, frightened and stubborn. Mrs. Benning took her by the wrist and hauled her to her feet. Florie didn't resist. With dragging feet, she followed Mrs. Benning to the door. There was a taxi waiting at the yellow curb outside. By the time I reached the street, it had pulled away and lost itself in the traffic.

I had a bad feeling that history was repeating itself, in spades. The bad feeling got worse when Heiss came up behind me and touched my

arm. He touched people whenever he could, to reassure himself of his membership in the race.

"Go and take gopher poison," I said.

The veined nose stood out on his pale face. "Yeah, I saw you in there. I thought you run out on me, boysie. I was consoling my bereavement with a nice fresh chunk of Mexican cactus candy."

"Pumping her, you mean."

"You unnerestimate me. I pumped Florie dry long since! They can't resist me, boysie. What is it I got that they can't resist me, I wonder." His mobile mouth was working overtime, talking him back into his own good opinion.

"What's the pitch, Max?"

"No dice, Archer. You got your chance to cut in, this aft. You couldn't be bothered with me. Now I can't be bothered."

"You want to be coaxed."

"Not me. Lay a small pinkie on me and I scream my head off." He cast a smug eye on the crowds streaming past us, as if he was depending on them for protection.

"You don't know me well," I said. "Those aren't my methods."

"I know you as well as I want to," he said. "You gave me the quick old brush this aft."

"Forget it. What's the tieup with this missing man in Arroyo Beach?"

"Come again, boysie." He leaned against the corner post of the storefront. "I should give you something for nothing. Nobody ever gave me something for nothing. I got to roust and hustle for what I get." With a lipstick-stained handkerchief, he wiped his face.

"I'm not trying to take something from you, Max."

"That's jakeroo, then. Good night. Don't think it ain't been charming." He turned away.

I said: "Lucy's dead."

That stopped him. "What did you say?"

"Lucy had her throat cut this afternoon."

"You're stringing me."

"Go out to the morgue and take a look for yourself. And if you won't tell me what you know, tell it to the cops."

"Maybe I will at that." His eyes shone like brown agates lit from behind. "Well, *bon soir* again."

He moved away, with one or two furtive back-glances, and joined the northward stream of pedestrians. I wanted to go after him and shake the truth out of him. But I had just said those weren't my methods, and the words stood.

chapter 10

I PICKED UP my car at the Mountview Motel and drove to Dr. Benning's house. There were no lights behind its white painted windows. From the overgrown yard it looked like a house no one had lived in for a long time. Its tall gray front stood flimsily against the dark red sky like a stage set propped by scantlings from behind.

When I rang the door bell, the house resumed its dimensions. Far in its interior, behind walls, the buzzer sounded like a trapped insect. I waited and rang again and no one answered. There were old-fashioned glass panels, ground in geometric patterns, set in both of the double doors. I pressed my face to one of them and looked in and saw nothing. Except that the glass was cracked in one corner, and gave slightly under pressure.

I slipped on a driving-glove and punched out the cracked corner. It smashed on the floor inside. I waited and looked up and down the street and rang the bell a third time. When nobody answered and nobody passed on the sidewalk I eased my arm through the triangular hole and snapped the Yale lock.

I closed and relocked the door with my gloved hand. Broken glass crunched under my heel. Feeling along the wall, I found the door of the waiting-room. A little light fell through the windows from the street, lending the room a vague beauty like an old woman with good features, heavily veiled.

I located the filing cabinet behind the desk in the corner. Using my pocket flash and shielding its light with my body, I went through the Active Patient drawer of the file. Camberwell, Carson, Cooley. There was no card for Lucy Champion.

Dousing the light, I moved along the wall to the inner door, which was a few inches ajar. I pushed it open wider, slid through and closed it behind

me. I switched on the flash again and probed the walls and furniture with its white finger of light. The room contained a flat-topped oak-veneer desk, a swivel chair and a couple of other chairs, an old three-tiered sectional bookcase not quite full of medical texts and journals. Above the bookcase on the calcimined wall, there was a framed diploma issued in June 1933 by a medical school I had never heard of.

I went through an open door into a room with figured oilcloth walls and a linoleum floor. Brownish stains on the far wall outlined the place where a gas range had once stood. An adjustable examination-table of brown-painted steel padded with black leatherette had taken its place. There were a battered white enameled instrument cabinet and a sterilizer against the wall beside it. On the other side of the room, under the blinded window, a faucet dripped steadily into a sink. I went to the closed door in the wall beyond it, and turned the knob. It was locked.

The second pass-key I tried opened the door. My light flashed on the ivory grin of death.

Six inches above the level of my eyes, a skeleton's shadowed sockets looked down hollowly. I thought in the instant of shock that it was a giant's bones, then saw that the long toe-bones dangled nearly a foot above the floor. The whole thing hung in the closet by wires attached to an overhead crossbar. Its joints had been carefully articulated with wire, and the movement of the door had set it swaying slightly. Its barred shadow wavered on the closet wall behind it.

It looked like a man's bones to me. I had an old brotherly feeling that I should take him by the unfleshed hand. He was lonely and desolate. I was afraid to touch him.

Somewhere in the house, no louder than a rodent squeak, a door or a floorboard creaked. It caused a croupy tightening in my breathing. I listened and heard the faint wheeze in my throat, and the dripping of the tap. Working with jumping fingers, I relocked the closet door and dropped the key in my pocket.

With the flash unlit in my hand, I retraced my steps by blind touch to the door of the consultation room. I had one foot across its metal-strip threshold when the light came on in my face. Dr. Benning's wife stood against the opposite wall with one hand on the light switch. She was so still that she might have been a figure in a frieze, part of the wall itself.

"What goes on in here?"

I squeezed out a husky answer: "The doctor wasn't here. I came in to wait."

"You a crib-smasher? Junkie? We've got no dope in this office."

"I came to ask a question. I thought the office might answer it for me."

"What question?" The small automatic steady in her hand was gunmetal blue, and her eyes had taken its color.

"Put the gun away, Mrs. Benning. I can't talk with iron in my face."

"You'll talk." She pulled herself away from the wall and moved towards me. Even in motion her body seemed still and frigid. But I could feel its power, like a land mine under a snowbank. "You're another lousy snooper, aren't you?"

"A fair-to-middling one. What happened to Florie?"

She stopped in the center of the room, her legs braced apart. The pupils of her gun-colored eyes were dark and empty like the muzzle of the gun at the center of her body.

I said: "If that gun went off and hurt me you'd be in a real jam. Put it away, it isn't needed."

She didn't seem to hear me. "I thought I saw you before. You were in the café. What happened to Florie is nobody's business but hers and mine. I paid her off and fired her. I don't approve of my servants stooling to scavengers. Does that take care of the question you had?"

"One of them."

"Fine. Now get out, or I'll have you arrested for burglary." The gun moved very little, but I felt it like a fingernail on my skin.

"I don't think you will."

"You want to stick around and find out?" She glanced at the telephone on the desk.

"I intend to. You're vulnerable, or you'd have called the cops right away. You don't talk like a doctor's wife, incidentally."

"Maybe you want to see my marriage license." She smiled a little, showing the tip of her tongue between white teeth. "I mean perchance you desire to peruse my connubial document. I can talk different ways, depending on who I'm talking to. To scavengers, I can also talk with a gun."

"I don't like the word scavenger."

"He doesn't like it," she said to nobody in particular.

"What do you think I want from you?"

"Money. Or are you one of the ones that gets paid off in the hay?"

"It's an idea. I'll take a rain check on it. Right now, I'd like to know what Lucy Champion was doing in this office. And if you won't put the gun away, set the safety."

She was still braced and tense, holding on to the gun the way a surfboarder clutches his stick. Muscular tension alone might squeeze the trigger and shoot me.

"The man's afraid." Her mouth was sullen and scornful, but she

clicked the safety on with her thumb. "What about Lucy Champion? I don't know any Lucy Champion."

"The young colored woman who came here this afternoon."

"Oh. Her. The doctor has all kinds of patients."

"Do many of them get themselves killed?"

"That's a funny question. I'm not laughing, though, notice?"

"Neither is Lucy. She had her throat cut this afternoon."

She tried to swallow that without a tremor, but she was shaken. Her braced body was more than ever like a surfboarder's moving fast on troubled water.

"You mean she's dead," she said dully.

"Yes."

Her eyes closed, and she swayed without falling. I took one long step and lifted the gun from her hand and ejected the clip. There was no shell in the chamber.

"Did you know her, Mrs. Benning?"

The question brought her out of her standing trance. Her eyes opened, tile blue again and impermeable. "She was one of my husband's patients. Naturally he'll be shocked. That automatic belongs to him, by the way." She had assumed a mask of respectability and the voice that went with it.

I tossed the gun on the desk and kept the clip. "Is that his skeleton in the closet, too?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Have it your way. You knew what I was talking about when I said that Lucy Champion was dead."

Her hand went to her forehead, white under dead-black hair. "I can't stand death, especially somebody's I know."

"How well did you know her?"

"She was a patient, I said. I've seen her a couple of times."

"Why isn't there a card for her?"

"A card?"

"In the active file."

"I don't know. Are you going to keep me standing here all night? I warn you, my husband will be back at any moment."

"How long have you been married, Mrs. Benning?"

"It's none of your damn business. Now get out of here or I *uill* call the police."

She said it without conviction. Since I had told her Lucy was dead, there had been no force in her. She looked like a sleepwalker struggling to come awake.

"Go ahead and call them."

She looked at me with blank loathing. "Augh." It was a shallow retching sound. "Do your damnedest. Do your dirtiest. Only get out of my sight."

The upper faces of her breasts gleamed through the fabric of her uniform like cold trembling moons. I walked around her and let myself out.

chapter 11

THE STATE BLACKTOP unwound like a used typewriter-ribbon under my headlights. It threaded the wilderness of stone that cut off Bella Valley from the ocean, clinging to the walls of precipitous canyons, looping across the shoulders of peaks that towered into darkness. After forty long mountain miles it dropped me down into the lap of the coastal range. A late moon was rising heavily on the sea.

Five minutes north of the junction with U.S. 101 Alternate, the lights of Arroyo Beach began to clutter the roadside. Motels, service stations, real-estate booths, chicken-steak pavilions were outlined in neon on the face of the darkness. I pulled up beside the pumps of a service station; while my car was being gassed I asked the attendant if he had a pay phone. He was a hammered-down elderly man in a uniform of gray coveralls and black leather bowtie, who looked and smelled as if he washed in crankcase oil. He jerked an oil-grained thumb towards the one-room office he had emerged from.

The local telephone directory was a thin pamphlet attached to the wall telephone by a chain. Mrs. Charles Singleton was well represented in it. She lived at 1411 Alameda Topanga, and her telephone number was 1411. A second number was listed for the gatehouse, a third for the chauffeur's apartment, a fourth for the gardener's cottage, a fifth for the butler's pantry.

When the attendant brought me my change, I asked him where Alameda Topanga was.

"Who you looking for, brother?"

"Nobody in particular. I'm sightseeing."

"This is a funny time of the night to be sightseeing." He looked me over. "They got a private patrol, nights, on the Alameda, and you don't look like no member of no garden club."

"I'm interested in real estate. It's a good section, I heard."

"Good ain't the word for it, brother. Since they built the big hotel and the moneybags moved up here from Malibu, that property is worth its weight in gold. I only wisht I had a piece of it. I could of had. Before the war, if the old lady would of let me take a little money out of the sock, I could of had five acres at a steal. I could of been sitting pretty now, but she says save your money. The place is dead, she says, the rich set is pulling out for keeps." His laugh was bitter and compulsive, like an old cough.

"Too bad," I said. "Where is the Alameda?"

He gave me directions, pointing at the dark foothills as if they rose on the edge of the promised land. I turned towards them at the next intersection, and drove to the outskirts. Empty fields strewn with rubbish lay like a no-man's land between the suburban cottages and the country estates. I entered an avenue hemmed in on both sides by the gray trunks and overarched by the branches of eucalyptus trees. It went by a hedged polo field and across a golf course. Cars were massed around a lighted clubhouse in the distance, and gusts of music were blown my way by the wind.

The road ascended hills terraced like the steps of an easy manmade purgatory. I caught glimpses of glass-and-aluminum living-machines gleaming like surgical equipment in the clinical moonlight; Venetian palaces, Côte d'Azur villas, castles in Spain; Gothic and Greek and Versailles and Chinese gardens. There was a great deal of vegetable life, but no people. Perhaps the atmosphere of this higher region was too rare and expensive for the human breathing system. It was the earthly paradise where money begot plants upon property. People were irrelevant, unless they happened to have money or property.

The stone gateposts bearing the number 1411 were backed up by a Tudor cottage with dark leaded windows. The gates stood open. A sweeping drive conducted me through a line of yews like honorary pallbearers to a villa that faced the moon in white Palladian splendor.

I parked under the columned porte-cochere and rang the old-fashioned bell at the side entrance. Soft, doubtful footsteps approached the deep-paneled door from the other side. A key ground in the lock, and a young woman looked out, soft chestnut hair shadowing her face.

"What is it, sir?" Her voice was soft and doubtful.

"Is it too late to see Mrs. Singleton?"

I handed her my business card. She turned her profile to the light: soft chin, soft bee-stung mouth, straight and honest nose. Her eyes were still shadowed, but I saw how young she was.

"Investigator," she said. "Does this mean you're from the agency? It's late for Mrs. Singleton. She isn't terribly well."

"I run my own agency."

"I see. But it is about Charlie— Mr. Singleton?"

"He's still on the missing list, then."

"Yes. He is."

"I may have a lead for you."

"Really? You think you know where he is?"

"I haven't got that far. It's only today I stumbled across—this matter. I don't even know the circumstances of his disappearance. Or if the reward still stands."

"It does," she said with a faint, dubious smile. "If you'll tell me just what it is you stumbled across."

Late or not, I wanted to see Mrs. Singleton. I tossed the girl the heaviest answer I could think of: "A dead body."

Her hand went to her breast like a frightened bird. "Charlie's? Not Charlie's?"

"It was a young colored woman named Lucy Champion. She had her throat cut. Know her?"

Her answer was slow in coming. I guessed that it was going to be a lie, and that the lie came hard. "No. I don't know her. What possible connection—?" Her voice died.

"She was carrying a newspaper clipping about Singleton's disappearance and the reward. I thought she might have come here about it. The police will probably have the same idea, when they get around to it."

"Was she killed here, in Arroyo Beach?"

"In Bella City." She didn't recognize the name, and I added: "It's an inland town, in the valley, about thirty miles from here as the crow flies."

"Come in." She consulted my card again: "Mr. Archer. I'll ask Mrs. Singleton if she will see you."

She left me standing in the entrance hall and walked along it to a lighted doorway. She was clothed with expensive bad taste in a knitted rust-colored suit that made her look slightly overblown, at least from the rear. Her movements had an awkward innocence, as if the sudden development of her body had embarrassed her with riches.

I put in several minutes looking at a sequence of Chinese paintings on the wall. A Chinese gentleman with giant ear-lugs denoting wisdom journeyed on foot through valleys and across rivers and mountains to a snow-line shrine. There were seven paintings, one for each stage of his journey.

The girl appeared in the doorway, her brown hair aureoled by the light behind her. "Mr. Archer. She'll see you."

The room had a lofty white ceiling supported by a Doric cornice. The walls were lined with cases of books uniformly bound in white calf.

The cases were interspersed with paintings; one of them, of a laughing girl in a low-cut bodice, might have been a Watteau or a Fragonard. On a white sofa with a curved back, a heavy gray-haired woman sat.

She had the kind of face, square-jawed and heavy-eyebrowed, that unlucky women sometimes inherit from their fathers. It might have been handsome in a horsy way before age and ego had stiffened the bony framework and thrust it forward under the skin like concealed artillery. The slack body was encased in a black silk dress that would have served for mourning. In the monolithic black lap, the pale yellow hands were conspicuous. They had a constant tremor.

She cleared her throat: "Sit down, Mr. Archer, in this armchair here." And after I had done so: "Now tell me just who you are."

"I'm a licensed private detective. Most of my work is in Los Angeles, and I have my office there. Before the war I was a detective-sergeant on the Long Beach force. I gave the young lady my card."

"Sylvia showed it to me. She told me further that you had some rather shocking information, about a colored young woman?"

"Her name is Lucy Champion. I found her with her throat cut in a Bella City motel. There was a clipping in her purse from the Bella City paper, concerning your son's disappearance and the reward you offered. It occurred to me as a possibility that she was killed because she intended to claim the reward. She showed up in Bella City about the same time your son left here, two weeks ago. And I thought she might have approached you."

"Isn't that rather jumping to conclusions, on the very flimsiest grounds?" Mrs. Singleton's voice was low and cultivated. Her hands twitched and plucked at each other like nervous scorpions. "You're surely not implying that we had anything whatever to do with the girl's death? Or with her life."

"I didn't make myself clear."—Though I thought I had. "Assume that your son met with foul play. Assume that Lucy Champion knew what had happened and who was responsible for it. If she was intending to go to you or the authorities with that sort of information, it would explain what was done to her."

Mrs. Singleton gave no sign of having heard me. She looked down at her angry hands as if she'd have liked to disown them. "Light me a cigarette, Sylvia."

"Of course." Sylvia rose from her seat at the end of the sofa, took a cigarette from an ivory box, placed one end between the clamped blue lips, applied the flame of a table-lighter to the other.

Mrs. Singleton inhaled deeply, and exhaled from mouth and nostrils.

The smoke crawled like fog in the crannies of her head. Even her eyes looked smoky. "You're not implying, I trust, that my son ran off to Bella City with a colored girl."

"Oh no, Mrs. Singleton!" the girl cried out. "He doesn't mean that." Then she remembered her place, which was to be seen and not heard. She sat down in her corner, looking as if she had given herself a fright.

Mrs. Singleton persisted: "What possible connection could there be between such a person and my son?"

"I'd like to know myself. In fact I'm interested enough to be willing to work on this case on a contingent basis."

"You mean, no doubt, that if you were to qualify for the reward, it would be paid to you. That can be taken for granted."

"Something more definite. Reward money has a way of slipping into policemen's pockets. It has a homing instinct for authority. And I'd like to be sure of my fifty a day and expenses."

"Naturally you would." She exhaled smoke, purring behind it like a cat in a curtain. "What I fail to see is any particular reason why I should underwrite your activities."

"I can't afford to work for fun. It would also be useful to be able to name you as a client."

"That I can understand." Her iron-gray head struck an imperious pose, a little like a late Roman emperor's. Her low voice rose in volume and pitch as if it were preparing to dominate a tea party or repel a barbarian assault. "I do *not* understand why you must interest yourself at all in my affairs. I am employing a detective agency now. They've already cost me more than I can easily afford, and in value received they've given me absolutely nothing. I'm not a wealthy woman." Which probably meant, in her circle, that she could count her millions on the fingers of one hand. She added breathlessly in the ebb of her self-pity: "I'm not unwilling to pay for helpful information, but if a large agency has failed to restore my son to me, as it has, I see no reason to suppose that one man alone might succeed, do you?"

The cigarette in the corner of her mouth was burning short. Sylvia removed it without being asked, and crushed it out in an ashtray.

I said: "Let me kick it around and see what I can do. I intend to find out why Lucy Champion was killed. If and when I do, it may lead to your son. That's my hunch, at least."

"Your hunch," she said contemptuously. "If Charles were being held under duress, for ransom, your visit to me tonight under these circumstances could be interpreted as an overture, from whoever was holding him. Did you know this Negress, the one you claim was murdered?"

"She was murdered. Did you know her?"

Her face radiated a dull white glow of anger. "I warn you not to be insolent, young man. I know how to deal with insolence."

I glanced at Sylvia, who smiled bleakly and almost imperceptibly shook her head:

"You must be very tired, Mrs. Singleton. It's very late."

The older woman paid no attention to her. She leaned towards me, her black silk lap wrinkling stiffly like iron under pressure:

"Only this morning, under circumstances similar to these, a man came here representing himself as a private detective, like you. He claimed that he could find Charles for me, if I would pay him part of the reward in advance. I naturally refused. Then he wasted a full hour of my time, asking me questions. When I tried to ask him a question or two in my turn, he had nothing to say, not a constructive word. What was his name, Sylvia?"

"Heiss."

"Heiss," the older woman repeated vehemently, as if she had invented the name on the spur of the moment. She rolled her eyes towards me. They had been pickled in tears, glassed in grief, but they were still shrewd. "Do you know *him*?"

"I don't think so."

"A most repugnant creature. Eventually he dared to suggest that I sign a contract to pay him five thousand dollars if he should produce my son, alive or dead. He boasted of his connections among the criminal element. I arrived at the conclusion that he was either conspiring to defraud me, or representing a criminal organization of some sort. I ordered him out of my house."

"And you've cast me in the same role?"

"Oh no," the girl said softly from her corner.

Mrs. Singleton subsided backward, her energy spent. Her head rolled on the curved back of the sofa, exposing a slack throat to an invisible knife. Rising words palpitated feebly in her throat: "I don't know what to think. I'm sick, old, exhausted, bereft. In a world of liars. No one will tell me anything."

Sylvia rose, her soft and anxious look shepherding me to the door. Mrs. Singleton called out with sudden eagerness:

"Mr. Archer. Did Charles send you to me? Is that it? Does he need money?" The change in her voice was startling. She sounded like a frightened girl. I turned to look at her face, and saw the same false girlishness touch it with beauty for an instant. The beauty passed like the beam of a searchlight moving across time. It left her mouth curled in a cynical parody of mother-love.

The situation was too complicated for me to understand or try to deal

with. I didn't know whether the umbilical cord between Mrs. Singleton and her son had stretched and broken and snapped back in her face and knocked her silly. Or whether she knew he was dead and was talking against despair. Whichever it was, she was ready to believe almost anything and suspicious of nearly everybody. Reality had betrayed her.

"I've never met Charles," I said. "Good night. Good luck."

She didn't answer.

chapter 12

SYLVIA WENT WITH me to the end of the hall. "I'm sorry, Mr. Archer. The last two weeks have been terribly hard on her. She's been under drugs for days. When things don't fit in with her ideas, she simply doesn't hear them, or she forgets them. It isn't that her mind is affected, exactly. She's suffered so much, she can't bear to talk about the facts, or even think about them."

"What facts?"

She said surprisingly: "Can we sit in your car? I think she really wants me to talk to you."

"You'd have to be psychic to know it."

"I am a bit psychic where Mrs. Singleton is concerned. When you're under a person's thumb, you know."

"You get to know the thumbprint. How long have you worked for her?"

"Only since June. But our families have known each other for a great many years. Charles's father and mine went to Harvard together." She opened the door, leaning across me to reach the knob. "Excuse me, I need some fresh air."

"Is she all right by herself?"

"There are servants on duty. They'll put her to bed." She started towards my car.

"Just a minute, Sylvia. Do you have a picture of Charles? A recent snapshot would be good."

"Why, yes, I do."

"Get it for me, will you?"

"I have one here," she said without embarrassment. She took a red leather wallet from the pocket of her suit and extracted a small snapshot that she handed me: "Is it big enough, clear enough?"

The picture showed a young man in tennis shorts and an open-necked short-sleeved shirt, smiling into the sun. The strength and leanness of his features were emphasized by a short service crew-cut. He was strongly built, with wide sloping shoulders and muscular forearms. But there was an unreal, actorish quality about him. His pose was self-conscious, chest pouting, stomach sucked in, as if he feared the cold eye of the Leica or the hot eye of the sun.

"It's clear enough," I said. "May I keep it?"

"For as long as you need it. It's very like him."

Climbing into my car, she showed a fine round leg. I noticed when I slid behind the wheel that she filled the interior with a clean springlike smell. I offered her a cigarette.

"Thanks, I never smoke."

"How old are you, Sylvia?"

"Twenty-one." She added with apparent irrelevance: "I just received the first quarterly check from Mother's trust fund."

"Good for you."

"About the check, I mean, it's nearly a thousand dollars. I can afford to employ you, if you'll work for me instead of Mrs. Singleton."

"I couldn't promise anything definite. You want him found pretty badly, don't you?

"Yes." The word had the pressure of her life behind it. "How much money should I give you?"

"Don't bother about it now."

"Why should you trust me?"

"Anybody would. What's more surprising is that you trust me."

"I know something about men," she said. "My father is a good man. You're not like that man Heiss."

"You talked to him?"

"I was in the room. All he wanted was money. It was so—naked. I had to threaten him with the police before he'd leave. It's really a pity. Mrs. Singleton might have opened out to you if he hadn't spoilt things."

"Are there things she could have told me, that she didn't?"

"Charlie's whole life," she said obscurely. "What did this Negro woman look like?"

I gave her a thumbnail description of Lucy Champion.

She interrupted me before I finished: "It's the same one." She opened the door on her side and began to get out. Everything she did was done gently, almost regretfully, as if an action was a dangerous gamble.

"Do you know her?"

"Yes. I want to show you something." And she was gone.

I lit a cigarette. Before I had smoked a half inch of it, Sylvia came out of the house and climbed in beside me again. "I believe this is hers."

She handed me a soft dark object. I turned on the overhead light to examine it. It was a woman's turban, knitted of black wool and gold thread. Inside, there was a maker's label: Denise.

"Where did you get this?"

"She was here, the day before yesterday."

"To see Mrs. Singleton?"

"I think now that must have been it. She drove up here in a taxicab in the middle of the afternoon. I was cutting flowers in the garden, and I saw her sitting in the back of the cab as if she couldn't make up her mind. Finally she got out, and the cab-driver started away. She stood in the drive and looked at the house for a moment. Then I think she lost her nerve."

"I can understand that."

"It is imposing, isn't it? I called out to her, to ask her what she wanted, and when she saw me coming towards her she literally ran. I felt like some sort of an ogress. I called to her not to be frightened, but she only ran faster down the drive. Her hat fell off, and she didn't even stop to pick it up. Which is how I happen to have it."

"You didn't follow her?"

"How could I? I had an enormous bunch of 'mums in my arms. The driver saw her running after him, and backed up for her. I had no right to stop her, in any case."

"You'd never seen her before?"

"Never. I thought perhaps she was a sightseer. She was quite smartly dressed, and this is a good hat. The fact that she didn't come back for it made me wonder, though."

"Did you go to the police?"

"Mrs. Singleton disapproved. I thought of asking Denise, but Mrs. Singleton was opposed to that, too."

"You know the woman who made this?"

"I know of her. She has a shop on the ocean boulevard, near the hotel."

"Here in Arroyo Beach?"

"Of course. Isn't it possible, if you questioned her, that she might know something more about Miss Champion?"

"It's very likely. Why didn't you see Denise yourself? You're not that much afraid of Mrs. Singleton."

"No." She was silent for a time. "Perhaps I was afraid of what I might find out. I'm not any more. Charles ran away with a woman, you see." She spoke with reluctance, but she got it out: "I think I was afraid that the Negro girl was—another of his women."

"His mother seems to have shared that idea. Any particular reason for it?"

"I don't know. She knows so much about him, more than she's ever admitted to herself."

"That's a hard saying."

"It's true. These pre-Freudian women know it all, but they never say it, even in their thoughts. Their whole lives are dressing for dinner in the jungle. That's my father's phrase. He teaches philosophy at Brown."

"Who was this woman, the one Charles ran away with?"

"A tall woman with yellow hair, and very beautiful. That's all I know about her. They were seen together in the bar at the hotel, the night he left. The parking lot attendant saw them drive away in his car."

"It doesn't necessarily mean he ran away with her. It sounds more like a pickup."

"No. They had been living together all summer. Charles has a mountain cabin on the Sky Route, and the woman was seen there with him nearly every weekend."

"How do you know?"

"I talked to a friend of Charles's who lives in the same canyon. Horace Wilding, the painter—you may have heard of him. He was very reticent, but he did tell me that he'd seen the woman there with Charlie. Perhaps if you talked to him? Since you're a man?"

I turned up the dash-lights and took out my notebook: "Address?"

"Mr. Wilding's address is 2712 Sky Route. He has no telephone. He said she was beautiful, too."

I turned to look at Sylvia, and saw that she was crying. Sitting quietly with her hands in her lap and tear-tracks bright on her cheeks. "I never cry!" she said fiercely. And then, not fiercely at all: "I wish I were beautiful, like her. I wish I had yellow hair."

She looked beautiful to me, and soft enough to put a finger through. Past the gentle outline of her body, I could see the lights of Arroyo Beach. Between the highway neons and the dotted line of lights hemstitching the shore, the spotlit dome of the great hotel swelled like a captive balloon. Beyond it the moon was rising like a smaller white balloon dragging a cable of light across the sea's surface.

"If you want to be a blonde," I said, "why don't you bleach your hair like all the other girls?"

"It wouldn't do any good. He wouldn't even notice."

"You're in love with Charlie."

"Of course I am," as if every young girl in her senses fell in love with Charlie. I waited for her to go on, and she did: "From the first time I saw him. When he came back to Harvard after the war, he spent a weekend

with us in Providence. I fell in love with *him*, not he with me. I was only a child. He was nice to me, though." Her voice sank to a confidential murmur: "He read Emily Dickinson with me. He told me he wanted to be a poet, and I thought I *was* Emily, I really did. All through college I let myself imagine that Charles would come for me and marry me. Of course he never did.

"I saw him a few times, once for lunch in Boston, and he was charming to me and that was all. Then he went home, and I never heard from him. Last spring when I graduated, I decided to come west and see him. Mrs. Singleton was looking for a companion, and my father secured the position for me. I thought if I was in the house with Charles he might fall in love with me. Mrs. Singleton rather approved. If Charles had to marry anyone, she preferred someone she could manage."

I looked into her face and saw that she was perfectly sincere. "You're a strange girl, Sylvia. Did you really talk it over with Mrs. Singleton?"

"I didn't have to. She left us together whenever it was possible. I can recognize a fact. Father says that a woman's chief virtue is the ability to see what is under her nose. And when she tells the truth about what she sees, that is her crowning glory."

"I take it back. You're not strange. You're unique."

"I think I am. But Charles didn't. He wasn't even at home very much, so I had no decent chance to make him fall in love with me by propinquity. He spent most of his time in his cabin, or driving around the state. I didn't know about the woman then, but I think she fits in with what he was trying to do. He was trying desperately to break away from his mother and her money and create a life of his own. Mrs. Singleton had all the money, you see, even before her husband died. *He* was the old-fashioned type of rich woman's husband: yachtsman and polo player, and errand boy for his wife. Charles had different ideas from his father. He believed that he and his class were out of touch with reality. That they had to save their individual souls by going down to the bottom of things and starting all over."

"Did he?"

"Save his soul, you mean? He tried. It turned out to be harder than he thought. This summer, for instance, he worked as a tomato-picker in the valley. His mother offered him the managership of a ranch, but he wouldn't take it. Of course he didn't last very long. He had a fight with a foreman and lost his job, if you could call it a job. Mrs. Singleton almost died when he came home with his face all swollen and blue. I almost died, too. But Charles seemed to take a certain satisfaction from it."

"When was this?"

"In July, a few weeks after I came. The middle of July."

"Where did the fight take place?"

"On a ranch near Bakersfield. I don't know exactly."

"After that, did he stay here until the first of September?"

"Off and on. He was often away on trips for two or three days at a time."

"Do you think he's off on another trip this time?"

"He may be. If he is, I don't believe he's coming back this time. Not ever. Not of his own accord."

"Do you think he's dead?" The question was blunt, but Sylvia could take it. Under her air of gentle bewilderment, she had strong reserves.

"I'd know it if he were dead. I don't believe he's dead. I believe he's made his final break with his mother, and the money from his great-grandfather's land grant."

"Are you sure you want him to come back?"

She hesitated before she spoke: "At least I must know that he's safe and living a kind of life that won't destroy him. For a man who shot down enemy planes during the war, he's such a child, such a dreamer. The wrong woman could break him." She drew in her breath sharply. "I hope I don't sound melodramatic."

"You sound very good to me. But you may be letting your imagination run away with you." I saw that she wasn't listening, and stopped.

Her mind was moving on a remote curve that she was trying to plot in words: "He felt so guilty about the money he'd never worked for, and doubly guilty because he was disappointing his mother. Charles wanted to suffer. He saw his whole life as an expiation. He would choose a woman who would make him suffer."

Against the moonlight her face had a virgin bleakness. The softness of her mouth and chin was broken by angular shadows.

"You know what sort of woman she was, then."

"Not really. All my information is third-hand. A detective interviewed the bartender at the hotel, and told Mrs. Singleton about the woman. She told me."

"Come down there with me," I said. "I'll buy you a drink. I think you could use a drink."

"Oh no. I've never been in a bar."

"You're twenty-one."

"It isn't that. I have to go in now. I always read her to sleep. Good night."

When I leaned across to open the door for her, I could see the tears on her face like spring rain.

chapter 13

A PAIR OF Filipino bell-hops in maroon uniforms gave me an interested look as I went in, and lost interest immediately. Under a Moorish arch opposite the hotel entrance, an assistant manager stood behind the reservations desk like a tuxedoed saint in a niche. Over an arch in the far corner, a neon sign spelled out *Cantina* in red script. I made my way through the potted-palm formality of the lobby and out to a patio planted with banana trees. Couples loitered in their shade. I crossed to the bar in a hurry.

It was a large L-shaped room decorated with bullfight posters, blue with smoke, pounding with monkeyhouse din. White female shoulders, dinner jackets black, blue, and plaid, swayed and gesticulated three deep at the long bar. The men had the unnaturally healthy, self-assured faces of sportsmen who had never really had to take a chance. Except perhaps on their women. The women's bodies looked more conscious than their heads. Somewhere behind the walls, an orchestra started a samba rhythm. Some of the shoulders and dinner jackets were lured away from the bar.

There were two bartenders working, an agile Latin youth and a thin-haired man who kept a sharp eye on the other. I waited until their business had slacked off, and asked the thin-haired man if he was the regular bartender. He gave me the impervious stare of his trade.

"Sure thing. What are you drinking?"

"Rye. I'd like to ask you a question."

"Go ahead, if you can think of a new one." His hands went on working of their own accord, filling a shot-glass for me and setting it out on the bar.

I paid him. "About Charles Singleton, Junior. You saw him the night he disappeared?"

"Oh, no." He glanced up at the ceiling in mock despair. "I tell it to the sheriff. I tell it to the reporters. I tell it to the private dicks." His eyes returned to my level, gray and opaque. "You a reporter?"

I showed him my identification.

"Another private dick," he lamented imperturbably. "Why don't you go back and tell the old lady she's wasting your time and her money? Junior blew with as stylish a blondie as you could hope to see. So why would he want to come back?"

"Why did he go away?"

"You didn't see her. The dame had everything." His hands illustrated his meaning. "That beast and junior are down in Mexico City or Havana having themselves a time, mark my words. Why would he come back?"

"You had a good look at the woman?"

"Sure. She bought a drink from me while she was waiting for junior. Besides, she was in with him a couple of times before."

"What was her drink?"

"Tom Collins."

"How was she dressed?"

"Dark suit, nothing flashy. Smart. Not the real class, but the next thing to it. She was a natural blonde. I could say this in my sleep." He closed his eyes. "Maybe I am."

"What color were her eyes?"

"Green or blue, or something in between."

"Turquoise?"

He opened his own eyes. "One question covers a lot of ground in your book, friend. Maybe we should collaborate on a poem, only some other day. You like turquoise, I'll say turquoise. She looked like one of those Polish kids I used to see in Chicago, but she was a long way off of West Madison, I can tell you that."

"Does anything ever happen that you miss?"

That bought me another thirty seconds of him. "Not around here it doesn't."

"And junior definitely wanted to go with her?"

"Sure. You think she held a gun on him? They were stuck on each other. He couldn't peel his eyes off of her."

"How did they leave? By car?"

"So I understand. Ask Dewey in the parking lot. Only you better slip him a little change first. He doesn't enjoy the sound of his own voice the way I do." Recognizing a good cue-line, he moved out of my range.

I drank up, and went outside. The hotel faced the sea, across a palm-

lined boulevard. The parking lot lay behind a row of small expensive shops on its landward side. Moving along the sidewalk, I passed a display of silver and rawhide pendants, two wax mannequins in peasant skirts, a window full of jade; and was hit between the eyes by the name Denise. It was printed in gold leaf on the plate-glass window of a hat shop. Behind the window a single hat hung on a stand by itself, like a masterpiece of sculpture in a museum. The shop was dark, and after a second's hesitation, I went on.

Under an arc light at the corner of the parking lot there was a small green-painted shack like a sentry-box. A sign attached to its wall stated: *The sole income of attendants consists of tips.* I stood beside the sign and held a dollar in the light. From somewhere among the sardined ranks of cars, a little man appeared. He was thin and gray. Under his old Navy turtleneck the shoulder-bones projected like pieces of waterworn driftwood. He moved silently in canvas sneakers, leaning forward as if he were being dragged by the tip of his long sharp nose.

"Make and color? Where's your ticket, mister?"

"My car's parked around the corner. I wanted to ask you about another car. I guess you're Dewey."

"I guess I am." He blinked his faded eyes, innocently contemplating his identity. The top of his uncombed gray head was on a level with my shoulder.

"You know a lot about cars, I bet."

"I bet. People, too. You're a cop, or I miss my guess. I bet you want to ask me about young Charlie Singleton."

"A private cop," I said. "How much do you bet?"

"One buck."

"You win, Dewey." I passed the money to him.

He folded it up small and tucked it in the watch pocket of the dirtiest gray flannels in the world. "It's only fair," he said earnestly. "You take up my valuable time. I was polishing windshields and I pick up plenty money polishing windshields on a Saturday night."

"Let's get it over with, then. You saw the woman he left with?"

"Absotively. She was a pipperoo. I seen her coming and going."

"Say again."

"Coming and going," he repeated. "The blonde lady. She druv up about ten o'clock in a new blue Plymouth station-wagon. I seen her get out in front of the hotel. I was around in front picking up a car. I seen her get out of the station-wagon and go inside the hotel. She was a pipperino." His gray-stubbled jaw hung slack and he closed his eyes to concentrate on the memory.

"What happened to the station-wagon?"

"The other one druv it away."

"Other one?"

"The other one that was driving the station-wagon. The dark-complected one that dropped the blonde lady off. She druv it away."

"Was she a colored woman?"

"The one that was driving the station wagon? Maybe she was. She was dark-complected. I didn't get a good look at her. I was watching the blonde lady. Then I come back here, and Charlie Singleton druv in after a while. He went inside and come out with the blonde lady and then they druv away."

"In his car?"

"Yessir. 1948 Buick sedan, two-tone green."

"You're very observant, Dewey."

"Shucks, I often seen young Charlie riding around in his car. I know cars. Druv my first car back in 1911 in Minneapolis, Minnesota."

"When they left here, which way did they go?"

"Sorry, chum, I can't say. I didn't see. That's what I told the other lady when she asked me, and she got mad and didn't give me no tip."

"What other lady was that?"

His faded eyes surveyed me, blinking slow signals to the faded brain behind them. "I got to get back to those windshields. My time is valuable on a Saturday night."

"I bet you can't remember about the other lady."

"How much you want to bet?"

"A dollar?"

"Double it?"

"Two dollars."

"Taken. She come blowing in a few minutes after they left, driving that blue Plymouth station-wagon."

"The dark-complected one?"

"Naw, this was another one, older. Wearing a leopard-skin coat. I seen her around here before. She asked me about the blonde lady and young Charlie Singleton, which way they went. I said I didn't see. She called me a iggoramus and left. She looked like she was hopping mad."

"Was anybody with her?"

"Naw. I don't remember."

"The woman live around here?"

"I seen her before. I don't know where she lives."

I put two ones in his hand. "Thanks, Dewey. One more thing. When Charlie drove away with the blonde, did he seem to be happy about it?"

"I dunno. He tipped me a buck. Anybody would be happy, going off with that blonde lady." A one-sided grin pulled at his wrinkled mouth.

"Me, f'r instance. I ain't had nothing to do with female flesh since I left my old lady in the depression. Twenty years is a long time, chum."

"It certainly is. Good night."

Sniffing lonesomely, Dewey pointed his nose toward the rank of cars and followed it out of sight.

chapter 14

I WENT BACK to the hotel and found a public telephone. According to the directory, the Denise Hat Shop was run by a Mrs. Denise Grinker whose residence was at 124 Jacaranda Lane. I called her home number, got an answer, and hung up.

The street twisted like a cowpath between the highway and the shore. Jacaranda and cypress trees darkened the road and obscured the houses along it. I drove slowly, in second gear, turning my flashlight on the house-fronts. It was a middle-class neighborhood subsiding into bohemian defeat. Weeds were rampant in the yards. Signs in dingy window corners advertised Handmade Pottery, Antiques, Typing: We Specialize in Manuscripts. The numerals 124 were painted in a vertical row, by hand, on the doorpost of a graying redwood bungalow.

I parked, and walked in under a shaggy eugenia arch. There was a rusty bicycle leaning against the wall on the front porch. The porch light came on when I knocked, and the door opened. A large woman wrapped in a flannel bathrobe appeared in the opening, one hip out. Because her hair was caught up in metal curlers, her face looked naked and very broad. In spite of that, it was a pleasant face. I could feel my frozen smile thaw into something more comfortable.

"Mrs. Grinker? My name is Archer."

"Hello," she said good-humoredly, looking me over with large brown eyes a little the worse for wear. "I didn't leave the darn shop unlocked again, touch wood?"

"I hope not."

"Aren't you a policeman?"

"More or less. It shows when I'm tired."

"Wait a minute." She brought a leather case out of the pocket of

her bathrobe and put on tortoise-shell spectacles. "I don't know you, do I?"

"No. I'm investigating a murder that occurred in Bella City this afternoon." I produced the rolled-up turban from my pocket and held it out to her. "This belonged to the victim. Did you make it?"

She peered at it. "It's got my name inside. What if I did?"

"You should be able to identify the customer you sold it to, if it's an original."

She leaned closer under the light, her glance shifting from the hat to me. The dark-rimmed spectacles had gathered her face into a shrewd hard pattern. "Is it a question of identification? You said it belonged to the victim. So who was the victim?"

"Lucy Champion was her name. She was a colored woman in her early twenties."

"And you want to know if I sold her this turban?"

"I didn't say that exactly. The question is who you sold it to."

"Do I have to answer that? Let me see your badge."

"I'm a private detective," I said, "working with the police."

"Who are you working *for*?"

"My client doesn't want her name used."

"Exactly!" She blew me a whiff of beer. "Professional ethics. That's how it is with me. I can't deny I sold that hat, and I won't deny it was an original. But how can I say who bought it from me? I made it away back last spring some time. I do know one thing for certain, though, it wasn't a colored girl bought it. There's never been one in my shop, except for a few brownskins from India and Persia and places like that. They're different."

"Born in different places, anyway."

"Okay, we won't argue. I have nothing against colored people. But they don't buy hats from me. This girl must have found the hat, or stolen it, or had it given to her, or bought it in a rummage sale. So even if I could remember who bought it from me, it wouldn't be fair to drag my client's name into a murder case, would it?" Her voice contained a hint of phoniness, an echo of the daytime palaver in her shop.

"If you worked at it, Mrs. Grinker, I think you could remember."

"Maybe I could and maybe I couldn't." She was troubled, and her voice grew shallower. "What if I did? It would be violating a professional confidence."

"Do milliners take an oath?"

"We have our standards," she said hollowly. "Oh hell, I don't want to lose customers if I can help it. The ones who can pay my prices are getting as scarce as eligible men."

I tried hard to look like an eligible man. "I can't give you my client's name. I will say that she's connected with the Singleton family."

"The Charles Singletons?" She pronounced the syllables slowly and distinctly, like a quotation from a poem she had always loved.

"Uh-huh."

"How is Mrs. Singleton?"

"Not very well. She's worried about her son—"

"Is this murder connected with him?"

"I'm trying to find that out, Mrs. Grinker. I never will find out unless I get some co-operation."

"I'm sorry. Mrs. Singleton isn't a customer of mine—I'm afraid she buys most of her hats in Paris—but of course I know *of* her. Come in."

The front door opened directly into a redwood-paneled living-room. A gas heater burned low in a red-brick fireplace. The room was warm and shabby and smelled of cats.

She waved a hospitable hand towards a studio couch covered with an afghan. A glass of beer was bubbling its life away on a redwood coffee-table beside the couch. "I was just having a beer for a nightcap. Let me get you one."

"I don't mind if you do."

She went into another room, closing the door behind her.

When I sat down on the studio couch, a fluffy gray cat came out from under it and jumped onto my knee. Its purring rose and fell like the sound of a distant plane. Somewhere in the house, I thought I heard a low voice talking. Denise was a long time coming back.

I set the cat on the floor, and moved across the room to the door she had closed. On the other side of it, she was saying, in clipped telephone accents: "He claims to be employed by Mrs. Charles Singleton." A silence, lightly scratched by the sound of the telephone. Then: "I absolutely won't, I promise you. Of course, I understand perfectly. I *did* want to get your view of the matter." Another scratchy silence. Denise intoned a saccharine good-night, and hung up.

I tiptoed back to my seat, with the gray cat weaving between my legs. It paraded back and forth in front of me, rubbing its sides on my trousers and looking up at my face with remote female disdain.

I said: "Scat."

Denise re-entered the room with a foaming glass in each hand. She said to the cat: "Doesn't the nasty mans like kitty-witties?"

The cat paid no attention.

I said: "There's a story about Confucius, Mrs. Grinker. He was a pre-Communist Chinaman."

"I know who Confucius is."

"It seems a stable burned down in a neighboring village, call it Bella City. Confucius wanted to know if any men were hurt. He didn't ask about the horses."

It hit her. The foam slopped over the rims of the beer-glasses and down across her fingers. She set the glasses on the coffee-table. "You can like cats and people, too," she said doubtfully. "I have a son in college, believe it or not. I even had a husband at one time. Whatever happened to him?"

"I'll look for him when I finish the case I'm on."

"Don't bother. Aren't you going to drink your beer?" She sat on the edge of the couch, wiping her wet fingers with a piece of Kleenex.

"The case I'm on," I said, "involves one dead woman and one missing man. If your cat had been run over by a hit-run driver, and somebody knew his license number, you'd expect to be told it. Who were you telephoning just now?"

"Nobody. It was a wrong number." Her fingers were twisting the damp Kleenex into a small cup-shaped object, roughly the shape of a woman's hat.

"The telephone didn't ring."

She looked up at me with pain on her large face. "This woman is one of my customers. I can vouch for her." The pain was partly economic and partly moral.

"How did Lucy Champion get the hat? Does your customer explain that?"

"Of course. That's why it's so utterly pointless to bring her name into it. Lucy Champion used to be her maid. She ran away some time ago, without giving notice. She stole the hat from her employer, and other things as well."

"What other things? Jewelry?"

"How did you know that?"

"I got it from the horse's mouth. Maybe horse isn't the right word. Mrs. Larkin is more of the pony type."

Denise didn't react to the name. Her quick unconscious fingers had moulded the Kleenex hat into a miniature replica of the black-and-gold turban. She noticed what her fingers had been making, and tossed it in front of the cat. The cat pounced.

The woman wagged her head from side to side. The metal curlers clicked dully like disconnected thoughts. "All this is very confusing. Oh well, let's drink up." She raised her glass. "Here's to confusion. And universal darkness covers all."

I reached for my beer. The sagging springs of the studio couch threw us together, shoulder to shoulder. "Where did you pick that up?"

"I went to school once, strangely enough. That was before I came down with a bad case of art. What did you say the name was?"

"Archer."

"I know *that*. The woman's name, who told you about the stolen jewelry."

"Mrs. Larkin. It's probably an alias. Her first name is Una."

"Small and dark? Fiftyish? Mannish type?"

"That's Una. Was she your customer?"

Denise frowned into her beer, sipped meditatively, came up with a light foam mustache. "I shouldn't be talking out loud like this. But if she's using an alias, there must be something fishy." Her dubious expression hardened into self-concern: "You wouldn't quote me, to her or anybody else? My business is on the edge of nothing, I have a boy to educate, I can't afford any sort of trouble."

"Neither can Una, or whatever her name is."

"It's Una Durano, *Miss* Una Durano. At least that's what she goes by here. How did *you* happen to know her?"

"I worked for her at one time, briefly." The afternoon seemed very long ago.

"Where does she come from?"

"I wouldn't know. I'm much more interested in where she is now."

"I might as well tell all," Denise said wryly. "She lives on the Peppermill estate, leased it early last spring. I heard she paid a fantastic sum: a thousand dollars a month."

"The diamonds are real, then?"

"Oh yes, the diamonds are real."

"And just where is the Peppermill estate?"

"I'll tell you. But you won't go and see her tonight?" She pressed my arm with strong fingers. "If you do, she'll realize I told tales out of school."

"This is real life, Denise."

"I know it. It's my personal real life. The hundred dollars she paid me for that hat took care of the rent that month."

"What month was it?"

"March, I think. It was the first one she bought in my shop. She's been back a couple of times since."

"It must have looked good on her, if anything could."

"Nothing could. She has no feminine quality. Anyway, she didn't buy the turban to wear herself. She paid for it, with a hundred-dollar bill. But it was the other woman with her who tried it on and wore it out of the shop." Her hand was still on my arm, like a bird that had settled on a comfortable roost for the night. She felt my muscles tense. "What's the matter?"

"The other woman. Describe her."

"She was a lovely girl, much younger than Miss Durano. A statuesque blonde, with the most wonderful blue eyes. She looked like a princess in my hat."

"Did she live with Miss Durano?"

"I can't say, though I saw them together several times. The blonde woman only came into my shop that once."

"Did you catch her name?"

"I'm afraid not. Is it important?" Her fingers were sculpturing the muscle patterns in my forearm.

"I don't know what's important and what isn't. You have been helpful, though." I stood up out of her grasp.

"Aren't you going to finish your beer? You can't go out there tonight. It's after midnight."

"I think I'll have a look at the place. Where is it?"

"I wish you wouldn't. Promise me anyway you won't go in and talk to her, not tonight."

"You shouldn't have phoned her," I said. "But I'll make you a better promise. If I find Charlie Singleton, I'll buy the most expensive hat in your store."

"For your wife?"

"I'm not married."

"Oh." She swallowed. "Well. To get to the Peppermill house, you turn left at the ocean boulevard and drive out to the end of town, past the cemetery. It's the first big estate beyond the cemetery. You'll know it by the greenhouses. And it has its own landing field."

She rose heavily and crossed the room to the door. The cat had torn the Kleenex hat into shreds that littered the carpet like dirty snowflakes.

chapter 15

I DROVE BACK to the ocean boulevard and turned south. A fresh breeze struck the windwing and was deflected into my face, carrying moisture and sea-smells. Behind the whizzing palm trees on the margin of my headlights, the sea itself streamed silver under the moon.

The boulevard curved left away from the beach. It climbed a grade past wind-tormented evergreens huddled arthritically on the hillside. A stone wall sprang up beside the road, amplifying the hum of the tires and the mutter of the engine. Beyond the wall, stone angels pointed at the sky; saints spread their arms in iron benediction.

The cemetery wall ended abruptly, and its place was taken by a spear-pointed iron fence. I caught glimpses through it of a great lawn returning to wilderness, beyond it a flat field with a corrugated-iron hangar at one end, a wind-sock blowing from its roof. I slowed down.

A heavy wrought-iron gate hung between obelisk-shaped gateposts, one of which had a large FOR SALE sign bolted to it. I got out and tried the gate. It was chained and padlocked. Through its bars I could see a long straight drive lined with coconut palms, at its end a massive house surrounded with outbuildings. The sloping glass roof of a conservatory glinted at the end of one wing.

The gate was climbable. Iron leaves between the bars provided foot- and hand-holds. I switched off my headlights and went over it. Circling wide on the lawn away from the drive, I struggled through the waist-high grass and weeds. The traveling moon accompanied me to the house.

The building was Spanish Renaissance with a strong Inquisition hangover. Narrow windows barred with ornamental ironwork were set deep

in its wide flat concrete face. A lighted window on the second floor formed a tall yellow rectangle striped with vertical bars. I could see part of the ceiling of the room, vague shadows dancing on it. After a while the shadows approached the window, grouping and solidifying into human form. I lay down flat on my back and pulled my jacket together over my shirt-front.

A man's head and shoulders appeared at the bottom of the tall yellow rectangle. I made out dark eyes in a moony blur of face under a tangle of hair. The eyes were raised to the sky. I looked straight up into its dark blue well, moon-washed and dripping with stars, and wondered what the man at the window was seeing there, or looking for.

He moved. Two pale hands sprang out from his dark silhouette and gripped the bars framing his face. He swayed from side to side, and I saw the white blaze on one side of his tangled head. His shoulders writhed. He seemed to be trying to wrench the bars out of their concrete sockets. Each time he tried and failed, he said one word in a low growling guttural.

"Hell," he said. "Hell. Hell."

The word fell heavily from his mouth forty or fifty times while his body tugged and heaved, flinging itself violently from side to side. He left the window then, as suddenly as he had appeared in it. I watched his slow shadow retreat across the ceiling and dissolve out of human shape.

Moving closer to the wall, I worked along it to the ground floor window in which a faint light showed. This opened into a long hallway with a rounded ceiling. The light came from an open door at its far end. Listening closely, I heard some kind of music, a thin jazz scrabbling and tapping on the lid of silence.

I circled the house to the left, past a row of closed garage-doors, a clay tennis-court patchily furred with twitch grass, a sunken garden overgrown with succulents. From its end a *barranca* widened down to a bluff that overhung the sea. Below the bluff, the sea slanted up like a corrugated-metal roof to the horizon.

I turned back to the house. Between it and the sunken garden there was a flagged patio walled with flowerboxes. Its tables and chairs were sand-blown and rusting, old iron relics of dead summers. Light fell among them from a picture window in the wall overhead. The jazz was louder behind the wall, like music at a dance to which I hadn't been invited.

The window was uncurtained but set too high to give me a view of the room. The black-beamed ceiling was visible, and the upper part of the far wall. Its oak panels were crowded with paintings of pigeon-breasted women in lace caps and mutton-chop-whiskered men, narrow-shouldered

in black Victorian coats. Somebody's ancestors, not Una's. She had been stamped out by a machine.

Standing on my toes, I could see the top of Una's head covered with short black curls like caracul. She was sitting perfectly still beside the window. A young man was sitting opposite her, his profile visible from the neck up. It was a heavy and amorphous profile, whatever strength it had concealed by pads of flesh under the chin, around the mouth and eyes. He had light brown hair bristling in an unkempt crew-cut. The focus of his attention was somewhere between him and Una, below the level of the windowsill. I guessed from the movement of his eye that they were playing cards.

The music behind the wall stopped and started again. It was the same old record, *Sentimental Lady*, being played over and over. Sentimental Una, I said to myself, just as the howling began. Distant and muted by intervening walls, the howling rose and fell like a coyote baying the moon. Or a man. The hair on the back of my neck prickled.

Una said, loudly enough to be heard through the plate-glass window: "For Christ's sake shut him up."

The man with the crew-cut rose into half-length view. He wore the white-drill smock of a nurse or orderly, but he had none of their air of efficiency. "What do I do, bring him down here?" He clenched his hands together in a womanish gesture.

"It looks as if you'll have to."

The howling rose again. The orderly's head turned towards it and then his body followed. He walked away from the window, out of my sight. Una got up and marched in the same direction. Her shoulders were trim in a tailored black pajama-jacket. She turned the music louder. It poured through the house like a dark intangible surf, and like a drowning person's, the man's cry rose above it. His howling was stilled suddenly. The music went on, washing over the human echo.

Then there were voices in the room, Una's voice weaving jerkily through the music: "Headache . . . get some peace . . . sedation"; and the growling guttural I had heard before, starting below the music and rising above it:

"I can't. It is terrible. Terrible things going on. I got to stop them."

"Old man Stopper himself. You're the one to stop them all right." It was the younger man's mezzo, with a titter running through it.

"Leave him alone!" Una cried savagely. "Let him have his say. You want him to yell all night?"

There was silence again, except for the swirling music. I stepped across a flowerbox into the patio and leaned my weight on one of the rusted tables. It held firm. Using a chair as a step, I got up onto the table-

top. The table teetered on its base, and I had a bad moment before it leveled back. When I straightened up, my head was almost even with the windowsill ten feet away.

On the far side of the room, Una was standing over a radiophonograph. She turned it low and walked directly towards the window. I ducked instinctively, but she wasn't looking at me. With an expression in which outrage and tolerance were combined, she was watching the man who stood in the center of the room. The man with the blaze of white like a lightning scar on the side of his head.

His small body was wrapped in a robe of red brocaded silk which hung in folds as if he had borrowed it from a larger man. Even his face seemed to have shrunk inside its skin. Instead of jowls he had pale loose wattles that flapped with the movement of his mouth.

"Terrible things." His broken growl was loud in the silence. "Going on all the time. I caught the dogs at my mamma. They crucified my daddy. I climbed up out of the culvert up on the hill and saw the nails in his hands and he said kill them all. Kill them all. Those were his last streetcar I went down into the tunnel under the river and the dead boys lying the ragpickers strutting around with the rods in their pants." He trailed off into an obscene medley of Anglo-Saxon and Italian.

The white-smocked orderly was sitting on the arm of a leather chair. The light from a standing lamp beside him gave him the unreality of a pink elephant. He called out like a rooter from the sidelines:

"You tell 'em, Durano. You got a beautiful engram, old boy."

Una darted towards him, angry face thrust forward: "*Mister* to you, you lump of dough. Call him *mister!*"

"*Mister* Durano, then. Sorry."

The man who bore the name raised his face to the light. The black eyes were flat and shiny, deep-sunk, like bits of coal pressed into soft snow brows. "*Mister* District Attorney," he cried earnestly. "He said there was rats in the river, rats in the Rouge Plant. He said kill them off. Rats in the drinking-water, swimming in my blood-veins, Mr. Doctor Attorney. I promised to clean them out."

"Give him the gun, for Christ's sake," Una said. "Get it over with."

"For Christ's sweet sake," Durano echoed her. "I seen him on the hill when I come up out of the culvert. Horseshoe nails in his hands, and the dogs at my mother. He give me the gun, said keep it in your pants boy, you get rats in the bloodstreams. I said I would clean them out." His thin hand dove like a weasel for the pocket of his bathrobe. It came out empty. "They took my gun. How can I clean them out when they took my rod away?" He raised his doubled fists in an agony of rage and beat his forehead with them. "Give me my gun!"

Una went to the record-player, almost running, as if a wind were hurrying her along. She turned it loud and came back to Durano, struggling step by step against the psychic wind that was blowing in the room. The fat orderly hitched up his smock and took a black automatic from under his belt. Durano pounced on him feebly. The orderly offered no resistance. Durano wrenched the automatic from his hands and backed away a few feet.

"Now!" he said with authority. He uttered a string of obscenities as if his mouth was full of them and he was spitting them out to be rid of them. "Now, you two, hands on the heads."

The orderly did as he was told. Una lined up beside him with her hands in the air, rings flashing. Her face was expressionless.

"This is it," Durano said thickly. There were red welts on his forehead where he had struck himself. His slack mouth continued moving but I couldn't hear what he said under the music. He leaned forward, strained white fingers around the gun. It looked as if it were holding him up in the beating ocean of noise.

Una said something in a low voice. The orderly glanced down with a faint fat smile. Durano took a skipping little step and shot him three times point-blank. The orderly lay down on the floor and pillowed his head on an up-flung arm, the faint smile still on his face.

Durano shot Una, three times. She doubled over, grimacing histrionically, and collapsed on a divan. Durano looked around the room for other possible victims. Finding none, he dropped the gun in the pocket of his bathrobe. I had noticed when he began to shoot with it that it was a toy cap-pistol.

Una rose from the divan and turned the music down. Durano watched her without surprise. The man in white hoisted himself to his feet and escorted Durano across the room. Durano looked back from the doorway with a dreaming smile. The self-inflicted bruises on his forehead were swelling and turning blue.

Una waved to him, exaggeratedly, like a mother to a child, before the orderly hustled him out. Then she sat down at the card table by the window and began to shuffle the deck. Sentimental Una.

I climbed down from my perch. Away down below on the beach I could hear the waves playing pattycake in the sand, sucking and gurgling rhythmically like idiot children.

I went around to the front of the house. The barred window on the second floor was still lit, and I could see the shadows on the ceiling. I moved in closer to the front door, which was made of carved black oak and about twelve feet high. It was the kind of door that demanded to be knocked on with the butt end of a gun. I stood in a weed-grown flowerbed,

leaned my chin on the iron railing of the portico, fingered the butt of the gun in my jacket pocket. And decided to call it a day.

I lacked the evidence and the power to put Una under arrest. Until I had one or the other, it would be better to leave her where I could find her again, safe in the bosom of her family.

chapter 16

THE SIGNPOST AT the mountain crossroads was splintered by the bullets of trigger-happy hunters. Four painted white boards projected from it. One pointed back the way I had come: ARROYO BEACH 7 MIS. One pointed forward: BELLA CITY 34 MIS. The one to the right said: EAGLE LOOKOUT 5 MIS; the one to the left: SKY ROUTE. The fifth direction, unmarked, was straight up to where a hawk wheeled on banked blue curves of air. It was bright early morning.

I got back behind the wheel of my car and turned onto the Sky Route. It was a hairpinning gravel road that traced the contours of the mountainside. On my left the mountain fell away into a canyon in which occasional rooftops were visible. Beyond the canyon's far edge the sea lay smoothed by distance like wine in a teacup, rimmed by the thin white curve of Arroyo Beach.

I passed a few rural mailboxes standing on posts at the entrances to steep lanes. The mailbox numbered 2712 also bore the legend HIGHHOLME, H. WILDING, ESQ., in bold red block-capitals. Wilding's lane widened into a clearing near the bottom of the canyon. A small stone house sat between white oaks at the back of the clearing.

There were bantam chickens scratching in the yard. An old hound cocked a grizzled snoot at me and lifted one eyebrow, refusing to move out of the path of the car. I set the emergency brake and got out. He growled at me apathetically, still without moving. A gray gander ran at me hissing and flapping, veered at the last moment into the trees. Somewhere in the wooded canyon below, a gang of kids were talking back and forth in Indian war-whoops.

The man who came out of the stone house could have passed for an Indian. He was dressed in a pair of dirty canvas shorts, and the rest of

him was burned almost black by the sun. His straight black hair, grayed in streaks, hung down over his ears.

"Hello," he said, strumming a silent overture on his washboard ribs. "Isn't it a fine clear day? I hope you noticed the quality of the light. It's rather special. Whistler might have been able to snare it in paint, not I."

"Mr. Wilding?"

"Of course." He extended a paint-stained hand. "Delighted to see you. Delighted to see anybody and any thing. Did it ever occur to you that light creates landscape, so that the world itself is created daily, in a sense? In my sense."

"It never has."

"Well, think about it," he said earnestly. "Light creates landscape out of old black chaos. We painters recreate it. I can't step outside in the morning without feeling like God himself on the second day. Or was it the third? It doesn't matter really. I've divested myself of time. I live in pure space."

"My name is Archer," I said, before I drowned in a mountain torrent of words. "Two weeks ago—"

"I'm sorry, I've been rude. I so seldom see people, I'm a veritable gramophone when I do. Archer, you say? Were you born under Sagittarius by any chance, the sign of the Archer? If you were," he concluded rather lamely, "that would be fun."

"Sagittarius is my first name, curiously enough. It's more fun than you can imagine."

Wilding uttered a high loud laugh like a mockingbird's imitation of human mirth. A hooting echo of his laughter came back from the children in the woods.

"Who are you anyway?" he said. "Come in and have a cup of tea. I've only just brewed some."

"I'm a detective."

"On the Singleton case?"

"Yes."

"Oh." He didn't renew his invitation to tea. "There's really nothing I can tell you that I haven't told the others."

"I'm working alone. I haven't talked to the others, and I don't know what they know or what they think. My own feeling is that he's dead."

"Charles dead?" Surprise or some other emotion pulled like a drawstring through his cordovan face and left it wrinkled. "That would be a waste. He was only twenty-nine. Why do you feel that he is dead, Mr. Archer?"

"Analogy. A woman was killed yesterday, apparently because she knew what happened to him."

"The blonde woman, was she killed?"

"A colored woman." I told him about Lucy.

He squatted Indian-fashion, resting one elbow on his folded bare knees, and drew a design in the dust with his forefinger. It was a long-faced mask in the shape of a coffin, which looked a little like his own face. A bantam rooster came and pecked at his hand.

Wilding stood up, and struck himself lightly over the eyes with the hand that had drawn the coffin. "There's your symbol-making faculty at work in its crudest form. I wonder sometimes if my sainted mother didn't deceive my father with a Navajo." He obliterated the dust-drawing with his sandaled feet, talking on without a pause: "The painter makes objects out of events, the poet makes words out of events. What does the man of action do, Mr. Archer? Suffer them?"

"Your friend Singleton did, I think. I take it he was your friend, or is."

"Certainly he was. I've known Charles since he was a schoolboy. I taught at Arroyo Prep School for a while, before my pictures sold. And he's been coming up here in the summers for nearly ten years. You can see his place from here."

He pointed north along the canyon. Near its head, a half mile or more away, a squat structure of brown oiled logs gleamed dully among the live oaks. "I helped him to build it myself, in the summer of 1941. It's only a one-room affair, but Charles always called it his studio. He came back from his freshman year at Harvard with ideas of becoming a poet. His mother's house on the Hill made him feel cramped and stuffy. Both she and her house—I don't know whether you know them—are crusty with tradition, *not* the kind of tradition that a budding poet could use. Charles came up here to escape from it. He called this canyon his private vale of soul-making."

"I'd like to have a look at his cabin."

"I'll go over with you."

Wilding moved impulsively towards my car, and I followed him. I drove up the lane in low gear and turned left on the gravel road cut into the canyon wall. The second mailbox we came to was stenciled with the name Singleton. I turned left again into a lane that slanted down the side of the canyon. About halfway to the bottom, the log house stood on a natural shelf between the canyon's converging walls. When I parked in front of it and got out, I saw that the front door was sealed with official paper.

I turned to Wilding: "You didn't tell me the place was sealed. Does the sheriff suspect violence?"

"He doesn't confide in me," Wilding said wryly. "When I told him about the shot I heard, he didn't seem to take it too seriously."

"The shot?"

"Sorry, I imagined that you knew. I heard a shot from this direction, late that Saturday night. I didn't think twice about it at the time, for the simple reason that I hear a great many shots, in and out of hunting season. When they questioned me the following week, I mentioned it of course. I believe they went over the premises quite thoroughly after that. They didn't find a bullet or anything of the sort."

"They wouldn't, if the slug went into Singleton."

"Mercy upon us," he said. "Do you really suppose that Charles was shot up here in his own cabin?"

"They must think something happened here, or they wouldn't have sealed it up. What else did you hear that Saturday night?"

"Nothing, absolutely nothing. A single shot around eleven o'clock, and that was all. A few cars went by, but there's always late night traffic on the road."

Wilding went to the large window that balanced the door in the front wall of the cabin. Standing on tiptoe, he peered in past the brown monk's-cloth drapes partly drawn across it. I looked over his shoulder into a square beamed room furnished in primitive luxury with polished wood, homespun fabrics, copper. Everything seemed to be in order and place. Above the copper-vented fireplace opposite the window, a handsome boy in oils looked out of a bleached wooden frame, over our heads, down five miles of sunlit canyon.

"That's Charles," Wilding said in a whisper, as if the boy in the frame might overhear him. "I painted it myself, and gave it to him. He looked like a young Shelley when he was twenty. I'm afraid he doesn't any more. Charles lost his ethereal quality during the war, when he took up with that woman. Or it may have been the war itself that did it. I suppose I have a prejudice against women. I'm a confirmed bachelor myself."

"Is she the blonde you mentioned?"

"Did I mention her? I didn't mean to." He turned and laid a brown hand on my shoulder. "Look here, old chap, are you one of the old lady's investigators? If you are, I don't want to say any more. Naturally I told the whole thing to the sheriff."

"Anything you tell me is between us."

His bright black eyes explored my face like foraging beetles. "What is your interest in Charles, just while we're on the subject?"

"Mrs. Singleton's paid companion hired me."

"Sylvia Treen? She's a lovely child, very much in love with Charles, I think. But I had no idea—"

"She knows about the blonde."

"Yes. I told her. I thought it might be for the best, in the long run

Whatever happened, Charles would never marry Sylvia. He's not the marrying sort. I *didn't* let Sylvia know how long the affair had lasted."

"She said it was just this summer."

"I let her imagine that. Actually, it's been going on for seven or eight years. Charles introduced me to her the year he entered the Air Force. Her name was Bess, I don't recall her surname. She was very young and quite exciting, marvelously colored. Perfect in every way, until she opened her mouth—but I mustn't tattle." He continued to tattle: "Charles always did have a proletarian penchant, you know. In spite of that or because of it, it was clearly a case of true love. The children were mad about each other. I shouldn't say children. *She* wasn't a child. She was already married, I understand. Which doubtless suited Charles." He added reflectively: "Perhaps he should have married her."

"You think she shot him?"

"I have no reason to think so. Certainly it's possible. Seven years is a long time for a young lady to wait for a young man to make up his mind."

"Was she here the night he disappeared?"

"I have no way of knowing. I did see a light in the cabin. Actually I haven't seen her for weeks. I do have the impression that they came up here together quite often during the summer, practically every Saturday night."

"And before that?"

He leaned against the sealed door and thought for a while, his thin brown arms folded on his chest. "Their visits haven't been continuous, I know that. Bess first appeared in the summer of 1943, and that was when I met her. I wanted to paint her. Charles was excessively possessive, and he never again asked me back when she was here. After that summer, I didn't set eyes on her again until 1945, when Charles left the Air Force. For the next two or three years I saw her at a distance quite often. Then Charles went back to Harvard in the fall of 1948 to study law, and I didn't see them again until this spring. It's possible that she followed him to Cambridge. I've never asked him about her."

"Why?"

"He's jealous, as I said, and secretive about his private affairs. It's partly his mother's doing. Mrs. Singleton's attitude towards the human libido is austere, to say the least."

"So you don't know where she came from, where she went, what she was doing in Arroyo Beach, who she was married to?"

"To all of those questions, I have to answer no."

"You can describe her?"

"If I can find the words. She was a young Aphrodite, a Velasquez Venus with a Nordic head."

"Try me again, Mr. Wilding, in simple language."

"A Nordic Aphrodite rising from the Baltic." He smiled reminiscently. "She was perfect until she opened her mouth. Then it was painfully clear that she had learned to speak English, if English is the word, in shall we say a rather barbarous milieu."

"I take it she was a blue-eyed blonde, and no lady."

"*Baltic* blue eyes," he insisted. "Hair like pale young cornsilk. Almost too dramatic to paint seriously, though I dearly should have loved to do a nude." His eyes were burning a figure into the air. "Charles wouldn't hear of it."

"Can you draw her from memory?" I said.

"I could if I wished." He kicked at the dirt like a rebellious boy. "I haven't really bothered with human material for years. My present concern is pure space, lit by the intelligible radiance of nature, if you follow me."

"I don't."

"In any case, I never use my art, or allow it to be used."

"Uh-huh. Very high-minded. You've divested yourself of time. It happens a friend of yours has done it the hard way, probably. Most people would climb down off their high horse and do what they can to help."

He gave me a bitter, wrinkled look. I thought he was going to cry. Instead he let out another of his high inhuman laughs, which echoed like the cry of a lost gull down the canyon. "I do believe you're right, Mr. Sagittarius. If you'll take me home, I'll see what I can do."

He came out of his house a half hour later, waving a piece of drawing paper:

"Here you are, as representational as I can make her. It's pastel chalk sprayed with fixative, so don't try to fold it."

I took the drawing from his hand. It was a colored sketch of a young woman. Her pale blonde braids were coroneted on her head. Her eyes had the dull gleaming suavity of tile. Wilding had caught her beauty, but she was older in time than in the picture.

He seemed to sense what I was thinking: "I had to sketch her as I first saw her. That was my image of her. She'll be seven or eight years older."

"She's changed the color of her hair, too."

"You know her, then."

"Not well. I'll get to know her better."

chapter 17

I CLIMBED THE front steps of Dr. Benning's house and rang the doorbell. The hole I had punched in the corner of the pane had been mended with cardboard and scotch tape. Dr. Benning came to the door in shirtsleeves, with suspenders dragging. His uncombed hair was a fringe of withering grass around the pink desert of his scalp. He had the air of a beaten old man, until he spoke. His voice was crisp and impatient:

"What can I do for you? Weren't you in my waiting-room yesterday afternoon?"

"This isn't a professional call, doctor."

"What kind of call is it? I'm just getting up."

"Haven't the police contacted you?"

"They have not. Are you a policeman?"

"A private detective, working with the police." I showed him my photostat. "We're investigating the murder of a colored girl named Lucy Champion. She visited your office yesterday afternoon."

"You followed her here?"

"I did."

"Do you care to tell me why?" In the harsh morning light his eyes were pale and strained.

"I was hired to."

"And now she's dead?"

"She got away from me. When I found her again, late yesterday afternoon, her throat had been cut."

"It's curious you didn't get in touch with me before. Since she was my patient, and I was apparently one of the last persons to see her alive."

"I tried to last night. Didn't your wife tell you?"

"I haven't had a chance to speak with her this morning. She isn't

well. Come in, though, won't you? If you'll just give me a chance to finish dressing, I'll be glad to help you in any way I can."

He ushered me into the waiting-room. I heard his slippered feet diminuendo up the stairs to the second floor. Ten minutes later he came down, dressed in a creased blue store suit, and freshly shaved. Leaning on the receptionist's desk in the corner, he lit a cigarette and offered me the package.

"Not before breakfast, thanks."

"I'm foolish to do it myself. I warn my patients about smoking on an empty stomach. But that's the way of us doctors. Preventive medicine is our watchword nowadays, and half of us are still dying prematurely of overwork. Physician, heal thyself." Benning had put on a professional manner along with his clothes.

"Speaking of premature death," I said.

"I shouldn't be chattering." His quick smile held remnants of boyish charm. "It's a bad habit I've fallen into, from trying to establish *rapport* with my patients. Now about this patient, Miss Champion. You say her throat was cut, Mr.—is it Archer?"

"Her throat was cut, and it's Archer."

"Exactly what sort of information do you want from me?"

"Your observations, personal and professional. Was yesterday the first time she came here to your office?"

"I believe it was the third time. I have to apologize for the condition of my records. I haven't had trained help recently. And then so many of my patients are one-time cash patients. It's in the nature of a general practice among, well, poor people. I don't always keep full records, except in the cash-book. I do recall that she was in twice before: once in the middle of last week I think, and once the week before that."

"Who referred her?"

"Her landlady, Mrs. Norris."

"You know Mrs. Norris?"

"Certainly. She's often done practical nursing for me. Anna Norris is the finest type of Negro woman, in my opinion. Or dark-complected woman, as she would say."

"Her son is suspected of this murder."

"Alex is?" He swung one nervous leg, and his heel rapped the side of the desk. "Why on earth should he be under suspicion?"

"He was on the scene. When they arrested him, he panicked and ran. If he hasn't been caught, he's probably still going."

"Even so, isn't Alex an unlikely suspect?"

"I think so. Lieutenant Brake doesn't. Alex was intimate with the girl, you know. He was going to marry her."

"Wasn't she much older?"

"How old was she?"

"I'd say in her middle twenties. She was a registered nurse, with several years of experience."

"What was the matter with her?"

A length of ash fell from his untended cigarette. Absently, he ground it into the carpet with the toe of his worn black shoe. "The matter with her?"

"What were you treating her for?"

"It amounted to nothing really," he answered after a pause. "She had an intestinal complaint which I think was caused by a slight colonic spasm. Unfortunately she knew too much about illness, and too little. She magnified her trouble into a malignant disease. Of course she had nothing of the sort, nothing more than a mild psychosomatic ailment. Do you follow me?"

"Partly. Her symptoms were caused by nerves."

"I wouldn't say nerves." Benning was expanding in the glow of his superior knowledge. "The total personality is the cause of psychosomatic ills. In our society a Negro, and especially a highly trained Negro woman like Miss Champion, is often subjected to frustrations that could lead to neurosis. A strong personality will sometimes convert incipient neurosis into physical symptoms. I'm stating it crudely, but that's what Miss Champion did. She felt cramped by her life, so to speak, and her frustration expressed itself in stomach cramp." He paused for breath.

"What was she doing here in Bella City?"

"I'd like to know myself. She claimed to be looking for a job, but I don't think she was registered in California. I'd give a good deal for a social history on her."

"She was from Detroit. Her family is poor and pretty ignorant. Does that help?"

"It doesn't tell me much about her psychic life, does it?"

"Why is her psychic life important?"

"I could see that fear of illness wasn't her only phobia. She had a deeper and more general fear which expressed itself in various ways. I tried to explain that to her, to give her some insight, but she wasn't equal to it. She broke down and cried on my shoulder. Then it came out about her other fears."

"What was she afraid of?"

He spread his hands like a lecturer. "It's hard to say. I'm not a psychiatrist, though I do try to keep up with the literature." He looked around his shabby waiting-room, and an obscure impulse made him add: "Which is more than you can say for my colleagues in this desolate town."

"Was her fear real or imaginary?"

"Precisely the question I can't answer, without knowing more about her." His eyes clouded with thought. "Fear is always real subjectively. The true question about fear is whether it's relevant, justified by the situation. In this case it seems to have been. Miss Champion believed that she was being hunted, that she was marked for death."

"Did she give you any details?"

"No. I didn't have time to gain her confidence. She failed to mention these persecution fears at all until her last visit, yesterday. You've been investigating her life and death, Mr. Archer. Was she really being hunted down by someone? Someone who finally caught her?"

"I don't know. I was trailing her myself, and I did a poor job of it and she caught on. If she was full of fear, that might have been enough to set her off." I asked a question I didn't want to ask: "You don't think she could have killed herself out of pure funk?"

Dr. Benning began to pace back and forth along a worn path that cut across the carpet from one door to the other. When he stopped and faced me, he looked ill at ease: "I'll be frank with you. I was concerned about her in that sense, which is why I did my best to allay her fears."

"You thought she had suicidal tendencies?"

"I took it into account as a possibility. That's all I can say. I'm no psychiatrist." He spread his hands palms upward in a gesture of awkward helplessness. "Was the wound consistent with suicide?"

"It was pretty deep to be self-inflicted. Brake or the deputy coroner can answer that question better than I can. And Brake will want your statement."

"I'm ready now, if you're going to the station."

I said I was. Benning went into the hall and got his hat. With his bald head covered he looked a good deal younger, but neither handsome nor well-heeled enough to be married to the woman he was married to.

He called up the stairs before we left: "I'm going out, Bess. Do you want anything?"

There was no answer.

chapter 18

THE DIRTY-WHITE BRICK CITY HALL was distinguished from the surrounding store- and office-buildings by a flagless flagpole standing in its patch of scorched grass. At the rear a concrete ramp sloped down from a paved parking lot to the scuffed green door of the police department. Benning turned at the door, smiling a sour private smile. "The descent into Avernus," he said.

Inside, in a green-walled corridor, a few wire-netted ceiling-bulbs maintained a bilious twilight. Under the brisk odors of floor oil and metal polish, the smells of fear and germicide, poverty and old sweat, kept up a complicated human murmur. In the furthest, dimmest corner, opposite a door marked DESK SERGEANT, a monumental shape sat on a wooden bench against the wall.

It belonged to a large Negro woman in a black cloth coat. The hair that showed under the side of her black felt hat was the color and texture of steel wool. I recognized her when she turned to look at us.

Benning spoke first—"Mrs. Norris!"—and went to her with his hands out.

She took them, raising her heavy, dark face to his. "I'm glad to see you, doctor." Cross-hatched by shadow, her nose and mouth and chin looked like black stone rounded by years of weather. Only her eyes gleamed sorrowfully with life. "They've arrested Alex. They're accusing him of murder."

"It must be a mistake," he said in a low bedside voice. "I know he's a good boy."

"He is a good boy." She looked questioningly at me.

"This is Mr. Archer, Mrs. Norris. He's working on the case. Mr. Archer has just been telling me that he thinks Alex is innocent."

"Thank you, Mr. Archer, and pleased to make your acquaintance."

"When was he arrested?"

"Early this morning, in the desert. He was trying to get out of the state. The car broke down. He was a young fool to run away in the first place. It's twice as bad for him, now that they've brought him back."

"Did you get him a lawyer?" Benning said.

"Yes, I'm having Mr. Santana. He's up in the Sierra for the weekend, but his housekeeper got in touch with him."

"He's a good man, Santana." Patting her shoulder, he moved towards the desk sergeant's door. "I'll talk to Brake, and see what I can do for Alex."

"I know Alex has a good friend in you, doctor."

Her words were hopeful, but her back and shoulders sloped in resignation. When she saw my intention of sitting down, she gathered her coat and shifted her body to one side, an involuntary sigh escaping from its concertina folds. I sat on a scrambled alphabet of initials carved in the soft wood of the bench.

"Do you know my son, Mr. Archer?"

"I talked to him a little last night."

"And you don't believe he's guilty?"

"No. He seemed very fond of Lucy."

She pursed up her heavy lips suspiciously, and said in a smaller voice: "Why do you say that?"

"He said it himself. Also, it showed in his actions."

That silenced her for a while. Her diffident black hand touched my arm very softly and retreated to her bosom. A thin gold wedding-band was sunk almost out of sight in the flesh of its third finger. "You are on our side, Mr. Archer?"

"The side of justice when I can find it. When I can't find it, I'm for the underdog."

"My son is no underdog," she said with a flash of pride.

"I'm afraid he'll be treated like one. There's a chance that Alex may be railroaded for this murder. The only sure way to prevent that is to pin it on the murderer. And you may be able to help me do that." I took a deep breath.

"I believe that you are a righteous man, Mr. Archer."

I let her believe it.

"You're welcome to anything I can say, or do," she continued. "It is true, what you said before. My boy was crazy for that woman. He wanted to marry her. I did my best to prevent it, every way I could. Alex is only nineteen, much too young to think about getting married. I planned an education for him. I tried to tell him that a dark-complected man is nothing in

this country without an education to stand on. And Lucy wasn't the wife for him. She was older than Alex, five or six years older, and she was fast in her habits. I sent her away from my house yesterday, and then she got herself killed. I confess I made a mistake. I rose up in anger against her. She had no safe place to go. If I'd known what was going to come to her, she could have stayed on with us."

"You don't have to blame yourself. I think what happened to her was bound to happen."

"Do you think that?"

"She was carrying something too heavy for her."

"I had that feeling. Yes. She was afraid." Mrs. Norris leaned towards me with heavy confiding charm: "I had the feeling from the beginning that Lucy Champion was bad luck to me and my house. She was from Detroit, and I lived there myself when Alex was an infant. Last night when they came to me and said that she was killed, it was like all the things I'd dreaded for myself and Alex, when we were moving from city to city trying to find a living in the depression. Like those things had suddenly come true for us at last, here in this valley. After all those years I worked and planned, keeping my name respectable."

Looking into her eyes, deep black springs tapping the deep black past, I couldn't think of anything to say.

"I misstated myself," she said with renewed energy. "It is not my name I care for. It's my son. I believed if we could get out of those big cities in the North and live in a decent place of our own, I could bring him up straight as his father wished for him. Now he has been arrested."

"Where is his father? It would be a good thing if he stood by."

"Yes, it would be a good thing. Alex' father died in the war. Mr. Norris was a chief petty officer in the United States Navy." She blew her nose with the force and effect of an exclamation mark, and dabbed at her eyes.

I waited a while, and said: "When did Lucy Champion come to your house?"

"She drove up in a taxi on a Sunday morning before church. It must have been two weeks ago today. I never like to do business on the Sabbath, but then I had no right to turn her away just for my private indulgence. The decent hotels were closed to her in this city, and most of the houses where our people can rent are not fit for dogs to inhabit. She was well spoken and well dressed. She told me she was on a vacation from her work, and she wanted to stay in a private house. I had the side room empty since the spring, and with Alex commencing college I needed the money.

"She seemed a peaceable little soul, though she was nervous and shy. She scarcely ever went out at all except to get herself lunch. She made

her own breakfast, and ate her dinners with us. We had a boarding arrangement."

"Did she eat well?"

"Now that you mention it, she didn't. Picked at her food like a bird. I asked her once or twice if my food was not agreeing with her, but she was vague in her answers."

"Did she mention any illness to you?"

"She never did, Mr. Archer. Excuse me, now, she did. There was some trouble with her stomach. Nervous stomach."

"And you sent her to Dr. Benning?"

"I didn't send her. I said if she needed a doctor, he was a good man to go to. Whether she went to him or not, that I can't say."

"She went to him all right. But she never spoke of Dr. Benning to you?"

"Not that I recollect, except for that one time I recommended him."

"Did she mention Mrs. Benning?"

"Mrs. Benning? Dr. Benning has no wife that I know of."

"I met her last night, in his house. At least I met a woman who calls herself Mrs. Benning."

"You must refer to Florida Gutierrez. She works for the doctor. He wouldn't marry her. Dr. Benning wouldn't marry any woman, not after the bad trouble he had with his first wife."

"Was he a widower?"

"Divorced," she said flatly, unable to conceal her disapproval. She added quickly: "Not that I blame the doctor, except for his foolishness marrying a woman so much younger than him — than he. She was a Jezebel to him, a blonde Jezebel mistreating him without shame. It ended as I expected, with her running off and divorcing him. At least that was the story I heard." She pulled herself up sharp. "I ought to wash out my mouth, repeating gossip and scandal on the Lord's Day."

"What was her name, Mrs. Norris?"

"Elizabeth Benning. Doctor called her Bess. I don't know her maiden name. He married her in the war, when he was a medical officer in the United States Navy. That was before we moved here from the North."

"And how long ago did she leave him?"

"Nearly two years, it was. He was better off without her, though I never dared tell him so."

"She seems to have come back."

"Now? In his house?"

I nodded.

Her mouth pursed up tight again. Her whole face closed against me. Distrust of white men lay deep and solid in her like stone strata deposited

through generations of time. "You won't repeat that which I have been saying? I have an evil tongue and I've still not learned to curb it."

"I'm trying to get you out of trouble, not deeper in."

She answered slowly, after a time: "I do believe you. And it's true, she returned to him?"

"She's there in the house. Didn't Lucy mention her at all? She went to the doctor three times, and Mrs. Benning has been working as his receptionist."

She answered positively: "Lucy never did."

"The doctor told me you've had nursing experience. Did Lucy show any signs of illness, physical or mental?"

"She seemed a well woman to me, apart from her eating habits. Of course when they drink, often they don't eat."

"She drank?"

"I learned to my sorrow and shame she was a drinker. And now that you ask me about her health, Mr. Archer, there is this thing has been puzzling me."

She opened the clasp of her black purse and groped for something inside. It turned out to be a clinical thermometer in a black leatherette carrying case, which she handed to me.

"I found this after she left, in the medicine cabinet over the sink in her room. Don't shake it down now. I want you to look at the temperature."

I opened the case and turned the narrow glass stem until I could see the column of mercury. It registered 107°F.

"Are you sure this was Lucy's?"

She pointed to the initials, L.C., inked on the case. "Certainly it belonged to her. She was a nurse."

"She couldn't have had a temperature like that, could she? I thought 107 was fatal."

"It is, for adults. I don't understand it myself. Do you think I should show it to the police?"

"I will, if you like. In the meantime, can you tell me anything more about her habits? You say she was quiet and shy?"

"Very much so, at first, keeping herself *to* herself. Most of her evenings she just plain sat in her room with a little portable gramaphone she brought along with her. I thought it was a peculiar way for a young woman to spend her vacation, and I said so. She laughed at that, but not in a humorous way. She became hysterical, and that was when I realized the strain that she was under. I began to feel the strain in the atmosphere when she was in the house. She was *in* the house twenty-three hours out of the twenty-four, it seemed like."

"Did she have any visitors?"

She hesitated. "No, she had never a one. She sat in her room and kept that jazzy music playing on the radio. Then I discovered her drinking. I was cleaning her room one day when she was out to buy her lunch downtown. I opened up a drawer to put fresh paper in the bottom, and it had whisky bottles in it, three or four empty pint bottles." Her voice was hushed with outrage.

"Maybe it helped her nerves."

She looked at me shrewdly: "Alex said just those words to me when I mentioned it to him. He defended her, which set me to thinking about the two of them living together in the same house. That was the end of last week. Then the middle of this week, late Wednesday night it was, I heard her tromping around in her room. I knocked on her door, and she responded in silk pajamas and there was Alex with her in her room. He said she was teaching him to dance. To all appearances, she was teaching my son the wicked ways of the world, in red silk pajamas, and I told her that to her face."

Her bosom heaved with remembered anger, like the aftershock of an earthquake:

"I told her she was degenerating my God-fearing household into a dance-hall, she must let my son alone. She said it was Alex's choice and he backed her up, he said he loved her. Then I was harsh with her. The red silk pajamas over her insolent flesh, they blinded my eyes to charity. My evil anger rose up and I said she must let Alex alone or leave my house in her nightclothes as she was. I said that I was planning better things for my son than she could give him. Alex spoke up then, saying if Lucy Champion went he would go along with her."

Now in a sense, he had. His mother's gaze seemed to be following his image into the shadows where Lucy had preceded him.

"You let her stay, though," I said.

"Yes. My son's wish is powerful with me. Lucy herself went away next morning, but she left her things behind. I don't know where she spent the day. I know she took a bus somewhere because she complained about the service that night when she came back. She was very excited in her manner."

"Thursday night?"

"Yes, it was Thursday night. All day Friday she was quiet and meek, though worried under the surface. I guessed she was planning something, and I was fearful she intended to run away with Alex. That night there was more trouble. I saw there was going to be trouble on top of trouble if she stayed."

"What was the Friday night trouble?"

"I'm ashamed to speak of it."

"It may be important." Casting back over the quarrel I had eavesdropped on, I guessed what Mrs. Norris was holding back: "She did have a visitor, didn't she?"

"Perhaps it is best for me to tell you, if it will help Alex." She hesitated. "Yes, Lucy had a visitor Friday night. I heard him go in by her side entrance and I watched for him and saw him when he left. She entertained a man in her room, a white man. I didn't speak of it that night, mistrusting my anger so. I promised myself to sleep and pray on it, but I slept very little. Lucy slept late and then she went out for lunch when I was at the store. When she came back, she tempted my son. She kissed him in full sight on the public street. It was wanton and shameless. I said she had to go, and she went. My boy wanted to leave me and go with her. I had to tell him then about the man in her room."

"You shouldn't have."

"I know it. I confess it. It was rash and scornful of me. And it failed to turn him from her. The same afternoon she telephoned for him and he went to her call. I asked him where he was going. He wouldn't say. He took the car without asking for my permission. I knew then he was lost to me, whatever happened. He never before refused to do my bidding."

She bowed suddenly, sobbing into her hands, a black Rachel lamenting the wrecked hopes of all mothers for their sons, black and white and tan. The desk sergeant appeared in his doorway and watched her in silence for a while before he spoke:

"Is she all right?"

"She's worried about her son."

"She has a right to be," he said indifferently. "You Archer?"

I said I was.

"Lieutenant Brake will see you in his office now, if you're waiting."

I thanked him, and he retreated quickly.

Mrs. Norris's fit of grief had subsided as suddenly as it rose. She said: "I'm truly sorry."

"It's all right. You've got to remember that Alex can still be decent, even if he did disobey you. He's old enough to make decisions."

"I can accept that," she said. "But that he should leave me for a light, common woman, it was cruel and it was wrong. She led him straight into jail."

"You shouldn't have worked on his jealousy," I said.

"Have you lost your faith in him because of that?"

"No, but it gives him a motive. Jealousy is dangerous stuff to fiddle with, especially when you're not sure of your facts."

"There was no doubt what she was, with a white man with her late at night in her room."

"She had only one room."

"That's true."

"Where else could she have a visitor?"

"In my good front parlor," she said. "I gave her free use of the parlor."

"Maybe she wanted privacy."

"Why, I'd like to know." The question implied its own answer.

"There are plenty of reasons for a man to visit a woman. What did this man look like?"

"I saw him only a second, under the street light at the corner. He was an ordinary-looking man, middle size, middle age. At least he seemed slow in his movements. I didn't lay eyes on his face, not to *see* it."

"Did you notice his clothes?"

"I did. He wore a panama straw hat, and a light-colored jacket. His trousers were darker in color. He did not appear respectable to me."

"He probably isn't respectable, Mrs. Norris. But I can assure you he visited her for business purposes."

"Do you know him?"

"His name is Max Heiss. He's a private detective."

"Like you?"

"Not exactly." I rose to go.

She laid a detaining hand on my arm: "I said too much, Mr. Archer. You do still believe that Alex is innocent?"

I said: "Of course." But I was bothered by the motive she had provided.

Mrs. Norris sensed my doubt, and thanked me sadly, withdrawing her hand.

chapter 19

BRAKE'S OFFICE was a bare cubicle walled with the same green plaster as the corridor. Close up under the ceiling, heating-pipes like sections of iron viscera hung from metal supports. A single small window, high in the wall, flyspecked a square of sky.

Dr. Benning was sitting uncomfortably with his hat on his knees, in a straight chair against the wall. Brake, with his usual air of alert stolidity, was talking into the telephone on his desk:

"I'm busy or haven't you heard. Let the HP handle it. I haven't been a traffic cop for twenty years."

He hung up, and ran a hand like a harrow through his dust-colored hair. Then he pretended to be noticing my presence in the doorway for the first time: "Oh. It's you. You decided to favor us with a visit. Come in and sit down. The doc here tells me you're taking a pretty active interest in this case."

I sat beside Benning, who smiled deprecatingly and opened his mouth to speak. Before he had a chance to, Brake went on:

"Since that's the situation, let's get a couple of things straight. I'm no one-man team. I like help, from private cops or citizens or anybody. I'm glad you sent the doc in to fill me in on the stiff, for instance."

"What do you think about suicide?"

Brake pawed my question away. "I'll come to that, I got a point to make first. If you're going to be in on this case, talking to my witnesses and messing around in general, I got to know where you stand and where your client stands."

"My original client ran out on me."

"So what's your interest? The doc here tells me you think we're trying to frame the Norris boy."

"I didn't put it so strongly," Benning said. "I also happen to agree with Mr. Archer, that the lad is probably innocent."

"Is that your opinion, Archer?"

"It is. I'd like to talk to Alex—"

"Sure you would. Did his mother hire you, by any chance? To cross me up, by any chance?"

"Having delusions of persecution, lieutenant?"

Hostility darkened his face for a slow instant, like a cloud-shadow crossing a hillside. "You admit it's your opinion that Norris ain't guilty. Before we do any talking, I want to know if you're looking for evidence to hang an opinion on, like a bloody lawyer. Or looking for evidence period."

"Evidence period. I was hired last night by a Miss Sylvia Treen. She's Mrs. Charles Singleton's companion."

Benning leaned forward at the sound of the second name: "Isn't she the woman whose son is missing?"

"That's right," Brake said. "We got a routine circular on him last week. Then we find this clipping about him in Champion's things. I been trying to figure how a missing high-lifer like Singleton fits in with a dinge cutting in the valley here. You got any ideas on the subject, doc?"

"I haven't really thought about it." He thought about it. "At first glance it does appear that the connections may be accidental. I know some of my patients carry all sorts of unconnected things around with them, clippings and whatnot. Women who are emotionally disturbed often identify themselves with people in the newspapers."

Brake turned to me impatiently: "What about you, Archer? You got any opinions?"

I glanced at Benning's long conscientious face, wondering how much he knew about his wife. It wasn't my job to fill him in on her background.

"None that you couldn't shoot full of holes with a peashooter."

"I favor a .45 myself," Brake said. "What about your client? Miss Treen, is that her name?"

"Miss Treen gave me some of the details of Singleton's disappearance." I passed them on to Brake, or at least enough of them to hold his co-operation in Bella City without being embarrassed by it in Arroyo Beach. I left the blonde woman out of it entirely.

Bored with my expurgated version, Brake snapped his metal armbands and fiddled with the papers in his "In" basket. Benning listened with close and nervous attention.

When I finished, the doctor rose abruptly, turning his hat in his hand: "If you'll excuse me, men, I should look in at the hospital before church."

"Appreciate you coming in," Brake said. "Give the stiff a once-over

if you like, but I don't think you'll find any hesitation marks. I never seen a suicide with a cut throat that didn't have hesitation marks. Or one that was cut so deep."

"Is she in the hospital morgue?"

"Yeah, waiting for autopsy. Just go right in and tell the guard I sent you."

"I'm on the staff of the hospital," Benning said with his sour private smile. He jammed his hat on his head and moved sideways to the door, his long legs scissoring awkwardly.

"Just a minute, doctor." I stood up and handed him the thermometer Mrs. Norris had given me. "This belonged to Lucy Champion. I'd like to see what you make of it."

He took the thermometer out of its case and held it to the light. "A hundred and seven, that's quite a temperature."

"Did Lucy have a fever yesterday?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Isn't it standard practice to take a patient's temperature?"

He answered after a pause: "Yes, I remember now, I took Miss Champion's. It was in the normal range. She wouldn't have lasted long with a temperature of 107."

"She didn't last long."

Brake came around his desk and took the thermometer from Benning's hand. "Where did you get this, Archer?"

"From Mrs. Norris. She found it in Lucy's room."

"She could of hotted it up with a lighted match. Eh, doc?"

Benning looked puzzled. "That wouldn't make much sense."

"It does to me. She might of been trying to prove that Champion was delirious, killed herself when she was out of her head."

"I don't think so," I said.

"Wait a minute. Hold it." Brake banged his desk with a gavel-heavy palm. "Didn't Champion come here around the first of the month?"

"Two weeks ago today."

"That's what I thought. You know what the heat was here in the valley weekend before last? A hundred and seven. It wasn't Champion who had the fever, it was this bloody town."

"Is that right, doctor?" I said. "Does a mercury thermometer hold a reading like that?"

"If it's not disturbed. It happens to mine all the time, I should have remembered."

"There goes your clue," Brake said.

"And here go I," Benning added with lame whimsy.

When the door had closed behind him, Brake leaned back in his

chair and lit a cigar. "You think there's anything in the doc's idea that Champion had a phobia?"

"He seems to know his psychology."

"Sure he does. He told me he wanted to specialize in it at one time, only he couldn't afford another five years of training. If he tells me the girl was psycho, I'm willing to take his word for it. He knows what he's talking about. The trouble is I don't." He blew a smoke ring and speared it with an obscene middle finger. "I'm all for physical evidence myself."

"Have you got much in that line?"

"Enough. You keep it under your hat and not go running to the defense?"

I caught him up on the word. "Aren't you jumping ahead of yourself a little?"

"I learned in this job to look a long way ahead."

He lifted a black-steel evidence case from the bottom drawer of his desk, and raised the lid. It contained the bolo knife with the carved black wooden handle. The bloodstains on the curved blade had dried dark brown.

"I've seen that."

"You don't know who it belongs to, though."

"Do you?"

"I showed this bolo to Mrs. Norris last night, before she knew how Champion got killed. She identified it right off. Her husband sent it to Alex from the Philippines, about seven years ago. It's been in the kid's possession ever since. He had it mounted on his bedroom wall, and she saw it every morning when she went in to make his bed, right up to yesterday morning."

"Did she say that?"

"She did. So maybe Champion had hot psychological flashes like the doc said. Maybe there's a tie-up with the Singleton case that we don't know about. I'm not going to lose any sleep over it. I got enough right here to arraign *and* convict." He shut the lid of the evidence box, relocked it and replaced it in the drawer.

I had been trying to decide all morning whether to give Brake everything I knew. I decided not to. The frayed ends of several lives, Singleton's and his blonde's, Lucy's, and Una's, were braided into the case. The pattern I was picking out strand by strand was too complicated to be explained in the language of physical evidence. Brake's understanding was an evidence box holding the kinds of facts that could be hammered through the skulls of a back-country jury. It wasn't a back-country case.

I said: "Have you got the boy's side of it yet? He isn't stupid. He must have known the bolo could be traced to him. Would he use it to do a murder and leave it lying there?"

"He didn't leave it lying. He started back for it. You saw him coming back. He even jumped you."

"That's not important. He thought I was messing with Lucy, and he got mad. The boy was under a strain."

"Sure he was. That's part of my case. He's the emotional type. I'm not claiming premeditation, see. I say it's a crime of passion, second degree. He got hot pants and busted in on her. Or maybe he lifted the key from her purse when they were out riding. Anyway she wasn't having any. He ran wild and cut her and took off. Then he remembered the knife and came back for it."

"Your story fits the external facts. It doesn't fit your suspect." But I was thinking that if and when Brake discovered the jealousy motive, he would have a steamroller case.

"You don't know these people the way I do. I deal with them every day." He unbuttoned his left shirt-cuff and bared a heavy freckled forearm. A white scar ran jaggedly from the wristbone to the elbow. "The buck that gave me this was trying for my throat."

"So that makes Norris a slasher."

"There's more to it than that." Brake was on the defensive in spite of his honorable scar. The violent world he fought for and against didn't suit him or anybody else, and he knew it.

"I think there is more to it. Too many people were interested in Lucy. I wouldn't settle for the first suspect we stumble across. It isn't that easy."

"You took me up wrong," he said. "What I mean, the boy acts guilty. I been looking at their faces for thirty years, listening to them talk." He didn't have to tell me. The thirty years were marked clearly on him, like fire-traces on an old tree. "All right, I'm still in the minor leagues. All right. This is my league. Champion is a minor league killing."

"Consciousness of guilt is pretty tricky stuff. It's psychological, for one thing."

"Psychological hell. It's a plain fact. We try to hold him for questioning, he runs out. We catch him and bring him back and he won't talk. I tried to talk to him. He's sullen. Tell him the world was flat, he wouldn't answer yes or no or maybe."

"How have you been treating him?"

"Never laid a finger on him, neither did anybody else." Brake pulled down his shirt-sleeve and rebuttoned the cuff. "We got our own brand of psychology."

"Where is he?"

"Out at the morgue."

"Isn't that a little unusual?"

"Not by me. I get a killing a month in this town, sometimes two. And

I solve them, see? Most of them. The atmosphere at the morgue will loosen a killer up faster than anything I know."

"Psychology."

"That's what I said. Now, you playing on my team or you want a crying towel to cry into? If you're on my team, we'll go on out there and see if he's ready to talk."

chapter 20

THE DOOR WAS numbered 01. The room behind the door was windowless, low-ceilinged, concrete-walled. When the door sucked shut behind us, we might have been in a sepulcher far down under the earth. Brake's heel struck dully on the composition floor. His shadow spread across me as he approached the only light in the room.

It was a cone-shaded bulb that hung low on an adjustable pulley over a rubber-wheeled stretcher. Lucy's sheeted body lay on the stretcher under its white glare. Her head was uncovered and turned towards Alex Norris. He was sitting in a chair on the far side of the stretcher, looking steadfastly into the dead woman's face. His right wrist was linked to hers by twin rings of blue steel. The pumps of a cooling system hummed and throbbed like time running down in the concrete walls. Behind the paired glass doors of the refrigerator, the other sheeted bodies might have been waiting for judgment, dreaming a preview of hell. It was as cold as hell.

The uniformed policeman who had been sitting opposite Alex got to his feet, raising his hand in a slovenly salute. "Morning, lieutenant."

"What's good about it? You running a wake in here, Schwartz?"

"You told me not to mark him. Like you said, I been letting nature take its course."

"Well? Did nature take its course?" Brake stood over Alex, wide and impermeable against the light. "You want to make a statement now?"

Moving to one side, I saw Alex look up slowly. His face had thinned. The passage of the night had pared flesh from his temples and cheekbones. His wide carved lips drew back from his teeth and closed again without making any sound.

"Or you want to sit all day and hold hands?"

"You heard what the man said," Schwartz growled. "He ain't fooling.

You sit here until you talk. In an hour or so the deputy coroner's gonna cut her up, finish the job you done. Maybe you want a ringside seat?"

Alex paid no attention to Brake or his subordinate. His gaze, incredulous and devoted, returned to the dead woman's head. Under the pitiless glare her hair shone like coiled steel shavings.

"What's the matter with you, Norris? You got no human feelings?" Brake sounded almost querulous in the subterranean stillness, almost feeble, as if the boy by accepting everything had turned the tables on him.

I said "Brake." The word had more force behind it than I intended.

"What's eating you?" He turned with a bewildered frown. The dead cigar in the corner of his mouth was like a black finger pulling one side of his face crooked. I retreated to the door, and he followed his own diminishing shadow towards me: "You want that crying towel?"

I said in a low voice, but not too low for Alex to overhear: "You're handling him wrong. He's a sensitive kid. You can't treat him like a punchy thug."

"Him sensitive?" Brake removed his cigar and spat on the floor. "He's got a hide like a rhinoceros."

"I don't think so. Give me a chance at him anyway. Uncouple him and let me talk to him alone."

"My wife and me were going up in the mountains today," Brake said irrelevantly. "We promised the kids a picnic."

He sneered at the dead cigar in his hand, dropped it suddenly, and ground it under his heel. "Schwartz! Turn him loose. Bring him over here."

The click of the handcuffs opening was tiny but very important, like the sound of a moral weight shifting on its fulcrum.

Schwartz pulled Alex to his feet. They crossed the room together, Alex round-shouldered and hanging back, Schwartz roughly urging him. "Taking him back to the cell, lieutenant?"

"Not yet." Brake addressed the boy: "Mr. Archer here is a friend of yours, Norris. He wants a little chinfest with you. Personally I think he's wasting all our time, but it's up to you. Will you talk to Mr. Archer?"

Alex looked from Brake to me. His smooth young face had the same expression I had seen on the ancient Indian face of the woman in the alley, beyond the reach of anything white men could do or say. He nodded wordlessly, and looked back at Lucy.

Brake and Schwartz went out. The door pulled shut. Alex started back across the room. He walked uncertainly with his legs spraddled like an old man's. The concrete floor sloped gently to a covered drain in the center of the room. He staggered down the barely perceptible slope and labored up the other side to the stretcher.

Standing over Lucy with his head bowed, he asked her: "Why did they do it?" in a dry hard voice.

I reached past him and pulled the sheet up over her head. I took him by the shoulders, turned him to face me. Part of his weight hung on me for a moment, until his muscles tightened. "Straighten up," I said.

He was as tall as I was, but his head was drooping on his undeveloped neck. I pushed my closed right hand under his chin. "Straighten up, Alex. Look at me."

He flinched away. I held him with my other hand on his shoulder. Suddenly he tensed and knocked my hand away from his chin.

"Steady, boy."

"I'm not a horse," he cried. "Don't you talk to me like I was a horse. Keep your hands off of me."

"You're worse than a horse. You're a stubborn mule. Your girl is lying dead, and you won't open your mouth to tell me who did it to her."

"They think I did it."

"It's your own fault if they do. You shouldn't have run out. You're lucky you didn't get shot."

"Lucky." The word was as blank as a hiccup.

"Lucky not to be dead. That's the one situation nobody can reverse. You think you've got it tough now, and you have, but that's no reason for turning into a dummy. One of these days you're going to snap out of it and really care what happened to Lucy. Only it'll be too late for you to do anything about it. You've got to help now."

I let go of him. He stood shakily, pulling at his fleshy lower lip with a bitten forefinger. Then he said: "I tried to tell them things at first, this morning when they brought me in. But him and the deputy D.A., they only had the one thing on their minds, to make me say I did it. Why would I kill my own fiancée?" The question rose up hard from his working chest. His face was blind with the effort of speaking, the more terrible effort of speaking as a man. He couldn't sustain it: "I wish I was dead like Lucy."

"If you were, you couldn't help us."

"Nobody asked for any help from me. Who wants any help from me?"

"I do."

"You don't believe I killed her?"

"No."

He looked at me for maybe half a minute, his gaze shifting in heartbeat rhythm from one of my eyes to the other. "She didn't do it to herself, did she? Mister? You don't think Lucy—cut her own throat?" He whispered the question so as not to embarrass the dead woman behind him.

"It isn't likely. The suggestion has been made. What made you think of it?"

"No reason, except she was scared. She was awful scared yesterday. That's why I loaned her the knife, when she left our house. She asked me for something to protect herself with. I had no gun or anything to give her." His voice dropped apologetically. "I gave her the knife."

"The one she was killed with?"

"Yes. They showed it to me this morning. It was a little bolo knife that my father sent me from the South Pacific."

"She was carrying the knife?"

"Yessir, in her purse. She had a big purse. She put it in her purse when I gave it to her, before she went away from our house. If they caught her, she said she would leave her mark on them." A frown of grief knitted his eyebrows.

"Who was she afraid of?"

"Men following her. It started Thursday, when she came back on the bus from Arroyo Beach. She said this man got off the bus and trailed her home. I thought at first she was spinning me a tale, trying to be mysterious. Then the next day I saw him myself when she came home from lunch. He was lurking around our street, and that night he came and visited her right in our house. I asked her about him yesterday, and she said that he was a crooked detective. That he was trying to make her do something against her will, but she wouldn't do it."

"Did she mention his name?"

"She said his name was Desmond, Julian Desmond. The next day another man was after her. I didn't see him. Lucy saw him, though. And there was the trouble at our house, and she moved out."

I swallowed the bitter taste of guilt in my mouth. "Was she planning to leave town?"

"She couldn't make up her mind before she left. She said she'd phone me. Then when she did phone, she was at the station. There was no train out for a couple of hours, and men there were spying on her. She said I should come with the car. I picked her up at the station and we got away from them, on the old airport road. We parked behind the airport fence, and we talked. She was shivering scared. Right there and then we decided to get married. I thought if we stayed together, I could defend her." His voice sank deep into his chest, almost out of hearing. "I didn't do so good."

"None of us did."

"She wanted to leave town right away. First we had to go back to the Mountview Motel to get her bags."

"Did she have her motel-key?"

"She said she lost it."

"Didn't give it to you?"

"Why would she give it to me? I couldn't go in there with her. Even if

I was light enough to pass, like her, I wouldn't do it. She went in there by herself. She never came out again. Somebody was waiting in there for her, and took the knife away from her and used it on her."

"Who was waiting?"

"Julian Desmond maybe. She wouldn't do what he wanted. Or the other one that was after her."

I was ashamed to tell him that I was the other one. His shoulders were slumped, and the flesh around his mouth hung almost stupidly. His moral strength was running out again. I placed Schwartz's chair for him and eased him into it:

"Sit down, Alex. You've covered the big points against you. There are a few little points left. Money is one of them. What were you intending to marry on?"

"I have some money of my own."

"How much?"

"Forty-five dollars. I made it picking tomatoes."

"Not much to get married on."

"I aimed to get a job. My back is strong." There was a sullen pride in his voice, but he wasn't meeting my eyes. "Lucy could work too. She worked as a nurse before."

"Where?"

"She didn't tell me where."

"She must have told you something."

"No sir. I never asked her."

"Did she have some money?"

"I didn't ask her. I wouldn't take money from a woman anyway."

"If you earned it, though," I said. "Didn't she say she'd cut you in if you got her safe out of town?"

"Cut me in?"

"On the reward," I said. "The Singleton reward."

His black gaze climbed slowly to the level of my eyes, and quickly dropped. He said to the floor: "Lucy didn't have to pay me money to marry her."

"Where were you going to get married? Where were you going to drive to yesterday?"

"Las Vegas or someplace. It didn't matter. Anyplace."

"Arroyo Beach?"

He didn't answer. I had pushed him too fast and too far. Looking down at the locked round impenetrable skull, I understood Brake's routine and desperate anger after thirty years of trying to fit human truth into the square-cut legal patterns handed down for his use by legislators and judges. And thinking of Brake's anger, I lost my own.

"Listen, Alex. We're going back to the beginning again. Lucy was murdered. We both want to find the murderer and see him punished. You have more reason than I have to want that. You claim you were in love with her."

"I was!" The drill had struck the nerve.

"That's one reason, then. You have another reason: Unless we find the real killer, you'll be spending years of your life in jail."

"I don't care what happens to me now."

"Think about Lucy. When you were waiting for her at the motel, somebody took that knife and cut her throat with it. Why?"

"I don't know why."

"What did Julian Desmond want her to do?"

"Be a witness for him," he answered slowly.

"A witness to what?"

"I don't know what."

"A murder," I said. "Was it a murder?"

"Maybe. I don't know."

"It was a murder, wasn't it? He wanted her to help him collect the reward. But she thought she could go it alone, and get the reward money for herself. Isn't that the reason she was killed?"

"I didn't think it out, mister."

"But you knew about the reward money? You knew she hoped to collect it."

"I never hoped to share in it," he said doggedly.

"She went to Arroyo Beach on Thursday to see his mother, and lost her nerve at the last minute. Isn't that the truth?"

"Yes, sir. I gathered that."

"She was going to try again yesterday."

"Maybe she was. I had nothing to do with any murder. Lucy didn't either."

"But she knew what happened to Singleton."

"She knew something."

"And you know something, too."

"She let on about it to me. I didn't ask her. I didn't want to have any part of it. She told it to me anyway."

"What did she tell you, Alex?"

"A man shot him. A crazy man shot him and he died. She told me that."

chapter 21

SCHWARTZ WAS ALONE in the corridor. I asked him where Brake was.

"In his car. He got a radio call."

I started for the ambulance entrance, and met Brake coming in.

"Norris do any talking?"

"Plenty."

"Confess?"

"Hardly. He's ready to make a statement."

"When I'm ready. I got more important things right now. I'm going on a barbecue picnic in the mountains." He smiled grimly, and called along the corridor to Schwartz: "Take Norris back to his cell. Get Pearce in the D.A.'s office, if he wants to make a statement. I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Barbecue picnic?" I said.

"Yeah." He pushed out through the white metal-sheathed door and let it swing back in my face. I followed him out to his car and got in the right side as he got in the left.

"I thought you'd be interested, Archer." The car leaped forward under us, its tires whistling in the gravel of the hospital parking lot. "It was a man that got himself barbecued. A man."

"Who is it?"

"Not identified yet. His car went over the side of Rancheria Canyon early this morning, and caught fire. When they found it they didn't even know there was a body in it at first. Couldn't get into it until they brought up a pump-truck from the ranger station. By that time the guy inside was nothing more than a clinker."

"Torch murder?"

"Hallman seems to think so. He's the CHP Captain. They had it tabbed as an accident until they thought to take a look at the gas tank. It's intact, and that means the gasoline for the fire came from somewhere else."

"What kind of car?"

"1948 Buick sedan. Registration destroyed. They're checking the license and engine number for ownership."

The last few jerry-built bungalows of the suburbs dropped behind. The speedometer needle moved steadily clockwise past fifty, sixty, and seventy, and hesitated near eighty. Brake flipped the siren switch. The siren began to moan in a low register.

I said before it drowned me out: "The car isn't two-tone green, is it? Singleton's car was a 1948 Buick. Is this one two-tone green?"

Brake pulled his hat off, leaving a red crimped line across his forehead, and tossed it into the back seat. "You've got Singleton on the brain. They didn't tell me the color. But where does he come in?"

"Norris said he was murdered," I shouted above the siren.

Brake switched it off. "What does Norris know about it?"

"Lucy Champion told him Singleton was shot."

"Only she don't make a very good witness. Don't let him string you, man. He'd tell you anything to wiggle his black neck out of the noose it's in."

The speedometer needle pushed on past eighty. At the top of a slight rise, the car lifted under us and almost took flight. I felt as if the speed had lifted us out of the world, pulled Brake loose from his roots in Bella City's broken pavements.

"Don't you think it's about time you admitted you made a mistake?"

He looked at me narrow-eyed. The speeding car wavered slightly with his attention before he turned back to the road. "When I got the weapon, his own knife?"

"She borrowed it from him for self-protection. She had it in her purse."

"Can he prove that?"

"He doesn't have to. You're the proof department."

"Hell, you're talking like a shyster lawyer. I hate those mealy-mouthed shysters that try to block the law."

"That's quite a mouthful."

"Chew on it."

The county blacktop we were on curved in to join a concrete highway running east and west across the valley. Brake went through a red sign and took the turn on squealing tires.

"What do I do when they go around cutting each other with knives,

setting fire to each other? Pat them on the back and tell them to go to it? I say stop them, put them away."

"Put the right one away, though. You can't solve these killings separately, hang Lucy's on Alex and this new one on somebody else."

"I can if they're not connected."

"I think they are connected."

"Show me proof."

"I'm not going up for the fresh air."

The road had begun to climb through dried clay cut-banks marked with yellow Slide Area warnings. Even with the gas-pedal floorboarded under Brake's toe, the speedometer needle stuck at seventy like the hand of a stopped clock. The folded blue slopes of the eastern range were framed in steep perspective by the windshield. They looked near enough to touch. A minute later, a mile nearer, they looked just as far away. I began to feel the altitude in my ears. As we rose into new perspectives, a few small white clouds burst out like ripe cotton behind the peaks. Away behind and down, Bella City stood in its fields like carelessly grouped chesspieces on a dusty board.

Five miles farther on, a thousand feet higher, we came to a semicircular gravel turnout on the left side of the highway. Several cars, a tow-truck and a red pump-truck were parked in the turnout. A group of men stood at its outer edge, looking down. Brake pulled up behind a new Ford with Highway Patrol markings. An officer in olive-drab whipcord detached himself from the group and came toward us:

"Hello, Brake. I told the boys to leave everything the way it was down there after they put out the fire. We even took pictures for you."

"You people are learning. I'd paste a gold star on your forehead if I had one. Like you to meet Lew Archer here, the thinker. Captain Hallman."

The captain gave me a puzzled look and a hard hand. We moved to the low log fence that rimmed the edge of the turnout. Below it the canyon-side slanted down to a gravel creek-bed overgrown with live oaks. From our height the September creek looked like a winding pebble-path dotted with occasional mud-puddles. A toy automobile lying on its bank sent up tendrils of steam to vanish in the sun. It was a Buick, painted two shades of green.

A trail of broken bushes, some of them charred, showed where the Buick had left the road and rolled down into the gorge. Brake said to Hallman:

"Find anything on the road?"

"The tireprints on the shoulder. It wasn't rolling fast, and that's what made me suspicious in the first place. No skid marks. Somebody set fire

to it and just took off the emergency and let her roll." Hallman added in dead earnest: "Whoever poured that gasoline and ignited it out here has got more than murder against him. It was just good luck it didn't start a forest fire. No wind."

"When did it happen?"

"Must have been before light this morning. The headlights were turned on. I didn't get a report until after eight o'clock. Then when I figured it for murder, I left the guy for you the way we found him."

"You still don't know who he is?"

"Wait until you see him. Like looking for a brand on a cooked hamburger. We should get a fast answer on the engine number, though."

"It's Singleton's car," I said to Brake.

"You might be right at that." He sighed. "Well, if I got to go down there, I got to go down."

"Feeling your age?" Hallman said. "You've packed a buck out of deeper holes than this. I'd go with you, but I been down twice already. I left a couple of the boys on guard."

I could see them sitting on a boulder behind the smashed car. In the telescopic air it was almost possible to read the conversation off their moving lips.

Brake stepped over the log barrier and started down. I followed him, using the zigzag trail he improvised and braking my descent by holding on to the branches of stunted trees. We were both breathing hard when we reached the bottom. The two highway patrolmen led us along the creekbed to the wreck.

It rested on its right side. The hood and top and radiator grille looked as if a sledgehammer crew had been working on them. All four tires had blown out. The left door was sprung.

"I'm afraid it isn't salvageable," one of the patrolmen said. "Even if there was any way of getting it out."

Brake turned on him savagely: "That's too bad. I was planning to take it for a spin."

He climbed onto the upper side of the car and wrenched the sprung door open as wide as it would go. I looked past him into the fire-gutted, water-soaked interior. Against the right front door, which rested on the ground, a human shape lay curled with its face hidden.

Brake lowered himself through the opening. Supporting himself with one hand on the steering column, he reached for the black shape with his other hand. Most of the clothes had burned away, but there was still a belt around the middle. When Brake took hold of the belt and heaved, it snapped in his hand. He passed it up to me. The blackened silver buckle bore the initials C A S.

chapter 22

I RANG THREE times at long intervals. Sunday bells tolled antiphonally in the silences. Mrs. Benning finally came to the door. A bathrobe of rough brown wool was pulled high around her throat. Her face was marked by sleep, as if she had been battling dreams all morning.

"You again."

"Me again. Is the doctor in?"

"He's at church." She tried to shut the door.

My foot prevented her. "That's fine. I want to talk to you."

"I'm not even dressed."

"You can dress later. There's been another killing. Another friend of yours."

"Another?" Her hand covered her mouth, as if I had slapped her.

I pushed into the hallway with her and closed the door. Sealed off from the noon glare and the slow Sunday noises, we stood close and looked into each other's faces. It seemed to me that we shared a twilight understanding. She turned away, her long back swaying from the waist. I kept my hands from reaching out to hold her still.

She spoke to the mirror: "Who was killed?"

"I think you know."

"My husband?" In the mirror, her face was masklike.

"That depends on who you're married to."

"Sam?" She whirled, in a dancer's movement, ending plumb. "I don't believe it."

"It occurred to me as a possibility that you were married to Charles Singleton."

She laughed unexpectedly. It wasn't pleasant laughter, and I was glad when it broke off.

"I've never even heard of Singleton. Is that the name—Singleton? I've been married to Sam Benning for over eight years."

"That wouldn't prevent you from knowing Singleton, knowing him intimately. I have evidence that you did. He was murdered this morning."

She recoiled from me, breathing hard. Between breaths, she said: "How was he killed?"

"Somebody hit him with a hammer or some other heavy weapon. It made an inch-deep dent in his skull, but it didn't kill him. Then he was driven up into the mountains in his own car, soaked with gasoline, and set fire to. The car was pushed over a three-hundred-foot bank and left to burn, with Singleton inside it."

"How do you know it was his car?"

"It's a 1948 Buick two-door with a dark green body and a light green top."

"You're sure it was him inside?"

"He's been identified. Most of his clothes were burned off him, but his belt-buckle has his initials engraved on it. Why don't you come down to the morgue and make a formal identification?"

"I told you I don't even know him."

"You're showing a lot of interest in a stranger."

"Naturally, when you come here and practically accuse me of murdering him. When did all this happen, anyway?"

"Before dawn this morning."

"I've been in bed all night and all morning. I took a couple of nembutals, and I'm still groggy. Why come to me?"

"Lucy Champion and Charles Singleton were both friends of yours. Weren't they, Bess?"

"They were not." She caught herself. "Why did you call me Bess? My name is Elizabeth."

"Horace Wilding calls you Bess."

"I never heard of him, either."

"He lives on the Sky Route near Singleton's studio. He says Singleton introduced him to you in 1943."

"Wilding is a liar, he always has been a liar." She caught her lower lip in white teeth and bit it hard.

"You said you didn't know him."

"You're doing the talking. Talk yourself to death."

"Is that what Lucy did?"

"I don't know what Lucy did."

"She was a friend of yours. She came here to this office to see you."

"Lucy Champion was my husband's patient," she said flatly. "I told you that last night."

"You were lying. This morning your husband lied to cover you. He went into an explanation of why he had no records on her, and then he had to explain what he was treating her for. Any real disease would show up in an autopsy, and he knew that. So he had to make her a hypochondriac, a patient whose sickness was caused by fear. There's no postmortem test for a phobia."

"She was a hypochondriac. Sam told me she was."

"I never knew a hypochondriac who didn't take his temperature once a day at least. Lucy hadn't touched her thermometer in two weeks."

"Wouldn't that sound good in court, though, against the word of a professional man and his wife?"

"It's good enough for me. And this is as close to court as you want to get."

"I see. You're judge and jury and everything else. Those are a lot of things for one little man to be."

"Don't stretch my patience. If I get tired of this, what happens to you? See what kind of a judge you draw downtown. I'm giving you a chance to talk before I hand my evidence to the cops."

"Why?" Deliberately, she made me conscious of her body. She turned slightly and raised one hand to her head so that one of her breasts was lifted asymmetrically under the wool. The wide sleeve fell away from her round white forearm, and her white face dreamed unward. "Why go to all that trouble for poor little me? Poor little old incendiary me?"

"Its no trouble at all," I said.

She laid a cool hand on my cheek and let it trail onto my shoulder before she withdrew it. "Come out to the kitchen. I was making coffee. We can talk there."

I followed her, not certain which of us was doing what the other wanted him to do. The kitchen was large and poorly lit by a window over the sink. The sink was piled with dishes. I sat down at a chipped enamel table and watched her pour two cups of coffee from an automatic glass maker. When she had finished pouring, I pushed my full cup across the table to her and took hers.

"You don't trust me as far as you can see me, Mr. Man. What did you say your name was?"

"Archer. I'm the last of my branch of the Archer family. I'd hate to see it die out suddenly by poison."

"No children? Wife?"

"None of those things. Are you interested?"

"I could be." She pushed out her lips, which were fleshy and well-molded. "It happens I'm already fixed up with a very satisfactory—husband."

"You find him satisfactory?"

Her eyes, which had not gone soft with the rest of her face, narrowed to cool blue slits. "Leave him out of it."

"Because you've been playing him for a sucker?"

"I said leave him out of it. Unless you want hot coffee in the face." She reached for her cup.

"What about hot gasoline?"

Her cup rattled on the table, slopping some of its contents over the rim. "Do I look like a murderer to you?"

"I've seen some fine-looking ones. You can't deny that you're a hard girl."

"I came out of a hard school," she said. "Do you know the mill section of Gary, Indiana?"

"I've passed through."

"I graduated from it with honors." A queer pride glinted in her smile. "That doesn't make me a criminal, though. I might have turned into one if Sam hadn't taken me out of it. I was on probation when he married me."

"What for?"

"Nothing much. I guess I was what you call a juvenile delinquent. I didn't feel like one. My old man was a hunkie, see, a real old-country hunkie. He had the grand old hunkie idea of tying one on and beating the womenfolk every Saturday night. I got tired of hiding under the bed, so I went out on my own. Out into the great world, ha. I waited table for a while and then I made a connection. My connection gave me a hat-check concession in one of the east side clubs. It wasn't much of a joint but by the time I was sixteen I was making more in tips than my old man ever made sweating it out in the mills. Only my luck went sour. There was gambling in the place I worked, somebody fluffed the protection, and I got picked up in a raid. I copped a plea and they put me on probation. The sourpuss judge set it up so I couldn't work in the clubs any more. That wasn't the worst of it. I had to go home and live with the family."

The dreams she had been battling in her sleep were taking over her waking mind. I didn't say a word.

"Naturally I took the first chance I had to get out of that stinking flat with the arguments. The social workers were snooping on me, making me stay in nights where the old man could get at me. Sam saved my life. He picked me up in a movie one day. I thought he was a wolf at first, but he was innocent. It was really funny to see a doctor so innocent. Sam was a Navy medico then, stationed at Great Lakes. He was the first man that wanted to marry me, and I took him up on it. He had his orders to California and he was leaving the next week. We came out here together."

"Did he know what he was getting?"

"He could see me," she said levelly. "I admit I didn't tell him I was jumping probation. But let's get one thing straight about Sam and me, before we drop the subject. I was the one that was doing him the favor. I always have been."

Looking at her and thinking of her husband, I believed her. "It's a pretty colorful background for a small-town doctor's wife. And I don't imagine you've told me the half of it."

"I don't imagine I have. More coffee?"

"More information. When did you and Benning come out here?"

"The spring of 1943. They gave him duty at Port Hueneme because it was near his home here. We rented a cottage in Arroyo Beach for six months. Then he was shipped out. The next two years he was at sea, medical officer on a big transport. I saw him a few times when it came into San Francisco."

"Who else were you seeing?"

"That's a hell of a question."

"A hell of an answer. Why did you leave Benning two years ago?"

"You've really been snooping, eh? I had my private reasons."

"You ran away with Singleton, didn't you?"

She had started to rise from the table, and froze for an instant, leaning on it, with her face averted. "Why don't you mind your own business?"

"Singleton was incinerated this morning. I've made it my business to find out who struck the match. It's a queer thing you're not interested."

"Is it?"

She poured herself another cup of coffee, with steady hands. Somewhere in the Chicago wilderness, or beating around the country in wartime and peacetime, she had gathered strength and learned balance. I looked at her firm white legs. She caught my look and returned it in a slow curve. To a window-peeper it would have seemed like a pleasant domestic scene on a Sunday morning. I almost wished it was.

I got up and looked out of the window. The backyard was overgrown with brown weeds and cluttered with the detritus of years. At its rear a small ramshackle barn sagged in the shade of a pepper tree.

She came up behind me. I felt her breath on my neck. Her body touched my back:

"You don't want to make trouble for me, Archer. I've had plenty of trouble. I could use a little peace in my old age."

I turned, softly ambushed by her hips. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-five. Church lasts a long time in these parts. He usually stays for Sunday school, too."

I took her head in my hands. Her breasts were full and strong be-

tween us. Her hands moved on my back. I was looking at the part-line that ran white through her dull black hair. Where the part divided it there were narrow vestiges of blondeness at the roots.

"I've never trusted blondes, Bess."

"I'm a natural brunette," she said thickly.

"You're a natural liar, anyway."

"Maybe I am," she said in a different voice. "I feel like nothing at all. This business has torn me in half, if you want the truth. I'm only trying to hold myself together and stay on this side of the walls."

"And keep your friends out of trouble."

"I have no friends."

"What about Una Durano?"

Her face went stupid, with ignorance or surprise.

"She bought you a hat last spring. I think you know her well."

Her mouth twisted in a grimace which threatened to turn to crying. She was silent.

"Who killed Singleton?"

She wagged her head from side to side. The short black hair fell over her face. Her face was gray and wretched. I felt ashamed of what I was doing to her, and went on doing it:

"You were with Singleton when he left Arroyo Beach. Was it a snatch? Did you finger him for a mob, and then have to kill him? Did you have to kill him because Lucy got big ideas? Did Lucy dream a five-grand dream and have to die before it came true?"

"You've got it all wrong. I didn't finger Charlie Singleton. I wouldn't do anything to hurt him, or Lucy either. She was a friend of mine, like you said."

"Go on."

"I can't," she said. "I'm not a squealer. I can't."

"Come down to the morgue and have a look at Charlie. You'll talk then."

"No." The word was like a retching in her insides. "Lay off me a little. Promise to lay off me, and I'll tell you something you don't know. Something important."

"How important?"

"Will you lay off me? I swear I'm absolutely clean."

"Let's have the one big fact."

Her head was down, but her slant blue gaze was on my face. "It isn't Charlie Singleton in the morgue."

"Who is it?"

"I don't know."

"Where is Singleton?"

"I can't answer any more questions. You promised you'd let me alone."

"How do you know it isn't Singleton?"

"That wasn't in the bargain," she said faintly. Behind fluttering eyelids, her blue gaze jumped like an unsteady gas flame.

"I'll put it as a hypothetical question. You know it wasn't Singleton this morning, because he was killed two weeks ago. He was shot, and you saw it happen. Yes or no?"

She didn't answer at all. Instead she fell forward against me, heavily. Her breath came fast as a small animal's. I had to hold her up.

chapter 23

A HIGH-PITCHED VOICE flicked at my back: "Take your hands off my wife."

Dr. Benning was standing just inside the kitchen door, with one hand on the knob. A black leather Bible was under his arm and his hat was on his head. I moved between him and his wife. "I was waiting to see you, doctor."

"Filth," he cried. "Ordure. I come home from the House of God—" The trembling of his mouth ruined the sentence.

"Nothing happened," the woman said behind me.

Benning had the eyes of a pole-axed steer. His hand on the doorknob and his shoulder against the jamb were supporting his weight. His body vibrated grossly like a tuning fork: "You're lying to me, both of you. You had your hands on her. Carnal knowledge—" The words knotted in his throat and almost choked him. "Like dogs. Like two dogs in the kitchen of my home."

"That's enough." The woman stepped around me. "I've heard enough from you, after I told you nothing happened. What would you do if it had?"

He answered disconnectedly: "I gave you a helping hand. I lifted you out of the gutter. You owe everything to me." The shock had sprung a booby-trap of clichés in his head.

"Good gray doctor Good-Samaritan! What would you do if anything had happened?"

He choked out: "A man can take so much from a woman. I have a gun in my desk—"

"So you'll shoot me down like the dog I am, eh?" She planted herself firmly on braced legs. Leaning towards him in a fishwife attitude, her

body seemed to be reveling in its power, drawing terrific energy from his weakness.

"I'll kill myself," he cried on a high note.

A few tears squeezed from his eyes and ran down into the failure marks that dragged from the wings of his nose. He was the suicidal man who never quite nerved himself to suicide. I realized suddenly why his description of Lucy's fears had sounded so convincing. They were his own.

His wife said: "Go ahead. Don't let me stop you. Maybe that isn't such a bad idea." She moved in on him with her hands on her hips, flailing him with words.

He cringed away from her with one hand stretched towards her, asking for mercy. His hat caught on the end of a towelrack and fell to the floor. He looked as if he were disintegrating.

"Don't, Bess," he said so rapidly that I could barely catch the words. "I didn't mean it. I love you. You're all I've got."

"Since when have you got me?"

He turned to the wall, stood with his face against the rough plaster, his shoulders heaving. His Bible dropped to the floor.

I took her by the elbows from behind: "Leave him alone."

"Why should I?"

"I hate to see any man broken down by any woman."

"You can leave."

"You're the one that's leaving."

"Who do you think you're talking to?" She was still showing fire, but it was warmed-over fire.

"Singleton's girl friend," I said into her ear. "Now get out of here. I want to ask your husband a couple of questions."

I pushed her through the doorway and closed it after her. She didn't try to come back into the kitchen, but I could feel her presence behind the door.

"Dr. Benning."

He was quieting down. After a while he turned to face me. In spite of his baldness, his middle age, his beaten air, he looked like a heartbroken adolescent in disguise.

"She's all I've got," he said. "Don't take her away from me." He was slipping rung by rung into a hell of self-abasement.

I lost patience: "I wouldn't take her as a gift. Now if you can concentrate for a minute, where was your wife between five and six yesterday afternoon?"

"Right here, with me." A grief-stricken hiccup made a cæsura between the phrases.

"Where was she between twelve last night and eight this morning?"

"In bed, of course."

"Will you swear to it, on the Bible?"

"Yes, I will." He picked up the Bible and held it with his right hand flat on the cover: "I swear that my wife Elizabeth Benning was in this house with me yesterday afternoon between five and six and all last night from midnight until morning. Does that satisfy you?"

"Yes. Thank you." I wasn't satisfied, but this was the best I could hope for until I found more evidence.

"Is that all?" He sounded disappointed. I wondered if he was afraid to be left alone in the house with her.

"Not quite. You had a servant until yesterday. Florie?"

"Florida Gutierrez, yes. My wife discharged her for incompetence."

"Do you know her address?"

"Of course. She'd been in my employ for nearly a year. 437 East Hidalgo Street, Apartment F."

Mrs. Benning was standing outside the door. She flattened herself against the wall to let me go by. Neither of us spoke.

The long one-storied frame building stood at right angles to Hidalgo Street, facing a littered alley. Across the alley, a high wire fence surrounded a yard of piled lumber. I could smell cut white pine when I got out of my car.

At the head of the roofed gallery that ran along the building, a very fat Mexican was propped in a chair against the wall. He had on a bright-green rayon shirt that showed every fold of his stomach and chest.

I said: "Good morning."

"Good afternoon, I think."

He removed a brown cigarette from his mouth and shifted his weight, bringing his slippered feet onto the floor. There was a grease-spot on the wall where his iron-gray head had rested. The open door beside him was lettered amateurishly with a large red A.

"Good afternoon then. Where is Apartment F?"

"Second last door." He gestured with his cigarette towards the rear, where a few dark men and women in their Sunday clothes were sitting in the shadow of the gallery, watching the lumberyard. "Florida ain't here, if it's her you're looking for."

"Florida Gutierrez?"

"Gutierrez." He repronounced the name for me, with the accent on the second syllable. "She went away."

"Where to?"

"How do I know where to? She told me she was going to live with her sister in Salinas." His brown eyes were gently cynical.

"When did she go?"

"Last night, about ten o'clock. She was five weeks behind in her rent. She came in with a handful of bills and said: 'how much do I owe? I am moving out, to live with my sister in Salinas.' I saw the man waiting outside in the big automobile and I said: 'Florida, your sister has changed in appearance.' She said: 'He is my brother-in-law.' And I said: "You're a lucky young woman, Florida. Ready to join the starvation army this morning, and tonight driving off with your brother-in-law in a Buick automobile.'" He set the cigarette between his smiling white teeth and blew a plume of smoke.

"Did you say Buick?"

"A fine big Buick," he said, "with holes in the side. And a foolish girl riding away in it, with holes in her head. What could I do?" He spread his hands in cheerful resignation. "She is not a member of the Martinez family. *Gracias á Dios*," he added under his breath.

"Did you notice the color of the car?"

"I couldn't tell for sure. It was dark night. Blue or green, I would say."

"And the man?"

He studied me with noncommittal eyes. "Florida is in trouble? You are from the police?"

I showed him my photostat and listened to him spell it out. "I thought it was trouble," he said quietly.

"Was the man young and good-looking?"

"He was a man of middle age. He didn't leave the automobile, even when Florida carried out her bags. No manners! I didn't like his looks."

"Can you describe him?"

"I didn't see him too well."

"I have a man in mind," I said. "Short brown hair, fattish, shifty-looking, wino eyes, panama hat, light tan jacket. Calls himself Julian Desmond."

He snapped his fingers. "That is the man. Florida called him Julian. Is he truly her brother-in-law?"

"No. You were right about him. I guess you know this town pretty well, Mr. Martinez."

The suggestion seemed to exhilarate him. "For sixty-three years! My father was born here."

"Here's a question you should be able to answer. If you were Julian, and you wanted to take Florida to a hotel for the night, which one would you go to?"

"Any of them in the lower town, I guess."

"Name the most likely ones, will you?" I took out my notebook.

He regarded it unhappily, disturbed by the notion of having anything he said committed to writing. "This trouble, is it serious?"

"Not for her. She's needed as a witness."

"A witness? Is that all? What kind of a witness?"

"The Buick she left in was involved in an accident this morning. I'm trying to identify the driver."

The old man sighed with relief. "I will be glad to help."

When I left him, I had the addresses of several hotels: the Rancheria, the Bella, the Oklahoma, the California, the Great West, the Pacific, and the Riviera. I was lucky on my third try, which happened to be the Great West.

chapter 24

IT WAS AN old railroad hotel on Main Street between the tracks and the highway. Its narrow-windowed brick face was lugubrious, as if the big trucks going by for years had broken its steam-age spirit. There were battered brass spittoons on the floor of the lobby, old Union Pacific photogravures on the walls. Four men were playing contract at a card table near the front window. They had the still faces and satisfied hands of veteran railroaders growing old on schedule.

The clerk was a skinny old man in a green eyeshade and a black alpaca coat. Yes, Mr. and Mrs. Desmond were registered: 310, on the third floor. No phone, I could just go up. The bell-hop was off on Sundays, he added whiningly.

I started for the elevator. The clerk called me back: "Wait a minute, young fellow, since you're going up anyways. This wire came in for Mr. Desmond this morning. I didn't like to disturb him." The eyeshade suffused his face with a green cadaverous flush.

I took the sealed yellow envelope. "I'll give it to Mr. Desmond."

"The elevator isn't working," he whined. "You'll have to use the stairs."

The second floor was hotter than the first. The third floor was stifling. At the end of a windowless corridor lit by twenty-watt bulbs I found the door I was looking for. A cardboard DO NOT DISTURB sign dangled from the knob.

I knocked. Bedsprings groaned. A woman called out drowsily: "Who is it? Julian?"

I said: "Florie?"

Unsteady footsteps approached the door. She fumbled at the lock. "Just a minute. I'm blind this morning."

I slipped the telegram into the breast pocket of my jacket. The door opened inward and I went in with it. Florie looked at me dumbly for five or six long seconds. Her black hair was matted and frizzled. Her eyes hung heavy and dark under heavy lids. In the frightened attitude her body had assumed, her hips and breasts seemed strangely irrelevant. The rouge-stained mouth in her sallow face was like a wilted red rose stuck in plasticine.

She made an erratic rush for the bed, and covered herself with a sheet. Her mouth fell open. I could see her pale lower gums. She brought it closed with an effort. "What do you want?"

"Not you, Florie. Don't be scared."

The air in the room was stale, spiked with cheap alcohol and perfume. A half-empty half-gallon jug of muscatel stood on the floor by her bed. Her clothes were scattered on the floor and chair and dresser. I guessed she had taken them off in a staggering fury before she passed out.

"Who are you? Did Julian send you?"

"I was hired by the hotel association to check on false registrations." I didn't mention that my work in that field had ended ten years ago.

She chattered over the taut edge of the sheet: "I didn't register. He did It was all his fault. Besides, we didn't do nothing. He brought me up here last night and parked me with a jar of muscadoodle. Then he went away and I haven't seen him since. I waited up for him half the night. He never did come back. So how do you have anything on me?"

"I'll make a bargain with you. No charges if you co-operate."

Suspicion darkened her face. "How do you mean, co-operate?" Her body wriggled uneasily under the sheet.

"Just answer my questions. Desmond's the one I want. It looks as if he ran out on you."

"What time is it?"

"One thirty."

"Sunday afternoon?"

"Uh-huh."

"He did run out! He promised to take me on a trip." She sat up on the bed, holding the sheet across her excessive bosom.

"How did you meet him?"

"I didn't meet him. He come to the office one night last week, Thursday night it was. I was just finishing up my cleaning. The doctor was out already, over at the library or someplace, and I was all alone in the office."

"Where was Mrs. Benning?"

"She was upstairs, I guess, Yeah, she was upstairs with that colored girl friend of hers."

"Lucy Champion?"

"That's the one. Some people have funny friends. This Lucy woman come to visit her and they went upstairs to talk. Julian Desmond said it was me he wanted to see. He fed me a line how he was recruiting nurse's aides for Hawaii at four hundred dollars a month! I was a sucker, I guess. I let him pump me about who I worked for and he took me out that night and got me plastered and asked me a bunch of questions about Mrs. Benning and that Lucy. I told him I didn't know Lucy from a hole in the ground, or Mrs. Benning either for that matter. He wanted to know when she came back to her husband and if her hair was dyed and if they were really married, stuff like that."

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him how she came back over the weekend, two weeks ago it was. When I walked in on Monday morning there she was. Doctor says: 'Meet my wife. She's been in a sanitarium.' She didn't look like san stuff to me—" Florie broke off suddenly. Her mouth clamped shut. "That was all I said. I caught on what he was up to, and you don't catch me playing blackmailers' games."

"I can see that. What else was there to tell?"

"Nothing else, not a thing. I don't know nothing about Mrs. Benning. She's a mystery woman to me."

I changed the direction of my approach: "Why did she fire you last night?"

"She didn't fire me."

"Why did you leave?"

"I didn't want to work for her any more."

"You worked for her yesterday, though."

"Yeah, sure, that was before she fired—I mean I left."

"Were you in the house all Saturday afternoon?"

"I was until six. I get off at six unless there's extra cleaning. I mean I did."

"Was Mrs. Benning there all afternoon?"

"Most of it. She went out in the late afternoon, said she was going to shop for Sunday."

"What time did she go out?"

"Around five, a little before five."

"What time did she come back?"

"I left before she came back."

"And the doctor?"

"He was there, far as I know."

"He didn't go out with her?"

"No, he said he was going to take a siesta."

"When did you see her after that?"

"I didn't."

"You saw her in Tom's Café around eight."

"Yeah. Yeah, I forgot about that." Florie was getting rattled.

"Did she give you money?"

She hesitated. "No." But she had to turn and look at the red plastic purse on the dresser.

"Why did she give you money?"

"She didn't."

"How much money?"

"Just my back pay," she stammered. "They owed me back pay."

"How much back pay?"

"Three hundred dollars."

"That's a lot of back pay. Isn't it?"

She lifted her heavy gaze to the ceiling and brought it down again to the red purse on the dresser. She watched the purse intently, as if it was alive and struggling to take flight. "It was a bonus." She had found a word. "She gave me a bonus."

"What for? She didn't like you."

"*You* don't like me anyway," she said in a childish voice. "I didn't do anything bad. I don't see how you have to jump on me."

"I like you fine," I lied. "Only it happens I'm trying to solve some murders. You're an important witness."

"Me?"

"You. What did she pay you to keep quiet about?"

"If I'm a witness, do I have to give the money back? The bonus?"

"Not if you keep your mouth shut about it."

"You won't tell?"

"I couldn't be bothered. What did she buy from you, Florie?"

I waited, listening to her breathing.

"It was the blood," she said. "I found some dried drops of blood on the floor of the examination room. I cleaned it up."

"When?"

"Monday two weeks ago, the first day I saw Mrs. Benning. I asked doctor about the blood and he said he had an emergency over the weekend—a tourist that cut his finger. I didn't think of it again until Mrs. Benning brought it up last night."

"Like the woman who urged her children not to put peas in their noses."

"Who was she?" Florie asked almost brightly.

"It's a story. The point is that the children put peas in their noses as soon as she turned her back. I'll bet a nickel you told Desmond about the blood the minute Mrs. Benning turned hers."

"I did not," she said, with that peculiar whining intonation which means guilty as charged but I can't help it if people are always leading me astray.

She introduced a diversion:

"Anyway, his name isn't Desmond. It's Heist or something like that. I caught a glimpse of his driver's license."

"When?"

"Last night in the car."

"The Buick?"

"Yeah. Personally I think he stole it. I had nothing to do with it. He already had it when he came to move me out of the apartment. He tried to tell me he *found* it, can you imagine. He said it was worth five thousand, probably more. I told him that was a lot of money for a secondhand Buick, but he just laughed."

"Was it a green 1948 two-door sedan?"

"I don't know the years. It was a two-door Buick, and that was the color. He stole it, didn't he?"

"I think he found it all right. Did he say where?"

"No. It must have been in town, though. He had no car at suppertime and then at ten o'clock when he picked me up at the apartment, he was driving this Buick. Where would a guy find a Buick?"

"It's a good question. Put on your clothes, Florie. I'll look away."

"You're not going to arrest me? I didn't do nothing wrong —anything wrong."

"I want you to try to identify somebody, that's all."

"Who?"

"That's another good question."

I went to the window and tried to open it. I could hardly breathe the hot foul air sealed in the little room. The window rose four inches and stuck forever. It faced north towards the City Hall and the Mission Hotel. In the sun-stopped streets a few pedestrians trudged, a few cars crawled and snored. Behind me I heard the twang of a snagged comb, Florie's quiet swearing, the pull and snap of a girdle, the slither of silk stockings, heels on the floor, water running in the sink.

At the rear of a bus depot below the window, a dusty blue bus was loading passengers: a pregnant Mexican woman herding half-naked brown children, a fieldworker in overalls who might have been the father of the children, an old man with a cane casting a tripod shadow on the asphalt, two young soldiers looking bored with any possible journey through any valley under any sky. The line moved forward slowly like a colored snake drunk with sun.

"Ready," Florie said.

She had on a bright red jacket over the batiste blouse. Her hair was combed back from her face, which looked harder under a white and red cosmetic mask. She peered at me anxiously, clutching the red plastic purse.

"Where are we going?"

"To the hospital."

"Is he in the hospital?"

"We'll see."

I carried her cardboard suitcase down to the lobby. Heiss had paid for the room in advance. The aged clerk didn't ask me about the telegram. The contract players followed our progress across the lobby to the street with knowing looks.

In my car, Florie relaxed into hangover somnolence. I drove across town to the county hospital. Obscured by the dust and insect splashes on the windshield, wavering in the heat, the streets and buildings were like an image of a city refracted through Florie's mind. The asphalt was soft as flesh under the wheels.

It was cold enough in the morgue.

chapter 25

SHE CAME OUT shivering, holding the red purse against her breast like an external heart that wouldn't hold still. I supported her elbow. At the ambulance door she pulled away from me and went out by herself to the car. She stumbled on high heels across the gravel, dazed by too much light.

When I got in behind the wheel she looked at me with horror as if my face had been scorched, and slid far over against the opposite door. Her eyes were like large marbles made of black glass.

I took the yellow Western Union envelope out of my inside pocket: Mr. Julian Desmond, c/o Great West Hotel, Bella City, California. As long as Heiss was alive, it was a crime to open it. Since he was dead, it was legitimate evidence.

It contained a night letter sent from Detroit by someone who signed himself "Van":

> ONCEOVER LIGHTLY DURANOS AIRMAIL REPORT FOLLOWS. LEO ARRESTED FELONIOUS ASSAUIT 1925 AGE TWENTY SERVED SIX ARRESTED 1927 KIDNAPPING NO CASE ALLEGED MEMBER OR PROTECTEE PURPLE GANG ARRESTED 1930 SUSPICION MURDER NOLLE PROSSED NO WITNESSES 1932 MURDER AIRTIGHT ALIBI ACQUITTED. BREAKUP PURPLE GANG LEO TO CHICAGO RAN GOON SQUAD THREE-FOUR YEARS THEN SYNDICATE TIEUP LEGIT FRONT HATCHECK CONCESSIONS. ARRESTED CONTRIBUTING DELINQUENCY MINOR EARLY 1942 COMMITTED STATE HOSPITAL DIAGNOSIS UNKNOWN RELEASED OCTOBER 1942 GUARDIANSHIP SISTER UNA PUBLIC STENOGRAPHER AND BOOKKEEPER. ENFORCER FOR NUMBERS RING ATTEMPTING TAKE OVER ROUGE AND WILLOW RUN PLANTS BROKEN UP 1943. 1944 LEO AND

UNA ORGANIZED DETROIT-BASED NUMBERS RING STILL GOING GOOD PROTECTION ESTIMATED WEEKLY NET TWO TO THREE GEES. LEO AND UNA NOT SEEN MICHIGAN SINCE JANUARY YPSILANTI HOUSE CLOSED BANKS BEING RUN BY WILLIAM GARIBALDI ALIAS GARBOLD OLDTIME PURPLE ALUMNUS. NO RECORD ELIZABETH BENNING LEO LIVING WITH BESS WIONOWSKI PRIOR DEPARTURE MICHIGAN. DO I DIG DEEPER.

"I should go some place and lie down," Florie said in a small voice. "You didn't tell me he was dead. You didn't tell me they blowtorched him. A shock like that is enough to kill a girl."

I put the telegram away. "I'm sorry. I didn't know who it was until you identified him. What makes you so positive?"

"I worked for a dentist one time. I notice teeth. Julian had bad teeth. I could tell it was him by the fillings." She covered her glassy black eyes with her hand. "Won't you take me where I can lie down?"

"First the police."

Brake was sitting at his desk with a deeply bitten sandwich in his hand. The bite he had taken was pouched in his cheek, rolling rhythmically with his chewing. He said around it:

"The wife put up enough sandwiches to feed an army before I remembered to call off the picnic. I told her to bring some down here, save me lunch money. Lunch money mounts up."

"Even with all this overtime?"

"I'm saving the overtime to buy a yacht." Brake knew I knew that no cop ever was paid for overtime.

"Miss Gutierrez here has just made a positive identification on your torch victim." I turned to her. "This is Lieutenant Brake."

Florie, who had been hanging back in the doorway, took a timid step forward. "Pleased to meet you. Mr. Archer convinced me to do my duty."

"Good for him." Brake popped the remnant of his sandwich into his mouth. Whatever was about to happen or be said, he would have finished his sandwich. "Does she know Singleton?"

"No. It isn't Singleton."

"The hell it isn't. The license was issued to Singleton, and the engine-number checks." He tapped a yellow teletype flimsy on top of the pile in his "In" basket.

"It's Singleton's car but not his body in it. The body belongs to Maxfield Heiss. He was a Los Angeles detective. Florie knew him well."

"I didn't know him so well. He made advances to me, trying to pump me about my bosses."

"Come inside, Miss Gutierrez, and shut the door behind you. Now tell me, who are your bosses?"

"Dr. and Mrs. Benning," I said.

"Let her do her own talking. What was he trying to find out about them, Miss Gutierrez?"

"When Mrs. Benning came back and if she dyed her hair and all like that."

"Anything about murder?"

"No, sir. Julian didn't say nothing about a murder."

"Julian who?"

"Heiss was using an alias," I said. "We should get over to Benning's."

I turned to the door. There was a cork bulletin board beside it, with a number of frayed Wanted circulars thumbtacked to it. I wondered how Mrs. Benning would look in that crude black-and-white.

Brake said: "Can you swear to the identification, Miss Gutierrez?"

"I guess, if you insist."

"What do you mean, you guess?"

"I never like to swear, it ain't ladylike."

Brake snorted and stood up and left me standing in the room with Florie. He returned with a uniformed policewoman, white-haired and granite-eyed:

"Mrs. Simpson will stay here with you, Miss Gutierrez, until I get back. You're not in custody, understand."

Brake and I climbed the ramp to the parking lot.

"We'll take my car. There's something I want you to read." I handed him the night letter from Detroit.

"I hope it makes more sense than that little dame. She's a moron."

"She can see and remember."

He grunted as he climbed into the car. "What did she see?"

"Blood. Dried blood on the floor of Benning's examination room. It was her job to clean it."

"When? Yesterday?"

"Two weeks ago. The Monday after the weekend that Singleton was shot."

"You definitely think he was shot?"

"Read the telegram. See what it means to you." I started the car, and turned on a crosstown street in the direction of Benning's house.

Brake looked up from the yellow paper. "It don't mean a great deal to me. It's mostly a rap sheet on a mobster I never heard of. Who is this Durano?"

"A Michigan numbers racketeer. He's in California now. His sister Una is the one who hired me in the first place."

"Why?"

"I think her brother shot Singleton. Lucy was a witness, and Una Durano was trying to find her and silence her."

"Where is he now?"

"I wouldn't know." But the blasted man with the toy gun was vivid behind my eyes.

"Funny you didn't pass on this stuff to me."

I said, a little disingenuously: "I couldn't tell you what I didn't know. I just got hold of the telegram, at the hotel where Heiss was staying."

"You're building a pretty big story out of a little bit of a telegram. And it ain't even evidence, unless you have your mitts on the guy that sent it. Who's this Van?"

"Sounds like an undercover man for a Detroit agency."

"Agency work costs money. Was Heiss a bigtimer?"

"Hardly, but he kept hoping. He thought he saw big money in this case, starting with the Singleton reward."

"What was he doing with Singleton's car?"

"He told Florie he found it. It was evidence, to help him collect the reward. Before that he tried to get Lucy to be a witness for him. But the Singleton reward was only a beginning for him. He had bigger money on his mind."

"Blackmail? From Durano?"

"It's possible."

"So you think those mobsters torched him."

"That's possible, too."

We had reached Benning's block. I parked in front of the barber shop beside his house. Brake made no move to get out of the car. "Do you know any of these things that you say are possible?"

"I don't know anything for sure. It's a peculiarity of this case. We've got damn little physical evidence and damn few honest witnesses. There's no single detail strong enough to hang your hat on. But I have got a *Gestalt* on the whole picture."

"A what?"

"Call it a hunch, about how the case hangs together. There are a lot of people in it, so it can't be simple. Even with two people, actions are never simple."

"Cut the philosophy. Come down to cases again. If these are gang killings, what are we doing here? Mrs. Benning doesn't come into it at all."

"Mrs. Benning is the central figure in the picture," I said. "She had three men on the string: Durano, Singleton, Benning. Durano shot Singleton over her. She couldn't face an investigation so she skipped out and came back to Benning for help."

"What did she do with Singleton?"

"We better ask her."

chapter 26

BLINDED AND GRAY-SIDED, Benning's house seemed to exhale its own shabby twilight. The doctor was pale and blinking like a twilight creature when he came to the door:

"Good afternoon, lieutenant."

He looked at me without speaking. Brake flashed his buzzer to indicate this wasn't a social call. Benning backed up abruptly, reaching for his hat on the hall rack and setting it on his head.

"You going somewhere, doctor?"

"Why no, I wasn't. I often wear a hat in the house." He gave Brake a sheepish smile.

The hallway was dim and chilly. An odor of rotting wood, which I hadn't noticed before, underlay the other odors. Men with a sense of failure like Benning had a knack of choosing the right environment for failure, or creating it around them. I listened for the sound of the woman in the house. There was no sound except the drip of a tap somewhere like a slow internal hemorrhage.

Brake said in formal tones: "I want to see the lady known as Mrs. Benning."

"Do you mean my wife?"

"I do."

"Then why not say so?" Benning spoke with acerbity. He was pulling himself together under the hat.

"Is she here?"

"Not at the moment, no." Biting at the inside of his long upper lip, the doctor resembled a worried camel chewing a bitter cud. "Before I answer any questions, no matter how charmingly phrased, I'd like to know if

you're here in an official capacity. Or do you simply derive a puerile pleasure from displaying your badge?"

Brake turned dull red. "There's no pleasure in it, doctor. I got two murders on the book, another one floating."

Benning swallowed several times, his adam's-apple bobbing like a distorted yo-yo in his throat. "You're not seriously suggesting that there's any connection." The words fell into a silence that seemed to disturb him. He filled it by adding: "Between my wife and these murders?"

"I'm asking for your co-operation, doctor. You gave it to me this morning. I can't keep down crime without the co-operation of the citizenry."

The two men faced each other in silence for a minute. Brake's silence was heavy, persistent, thick, like a tree-stump's. Benning's was tense and alert. He might have been listening to a sound too high for our ears to catch.

He cleared his throat. The distorted yo-yo bobbed. "Mrs. Benning has gone to San Francisco for a few days. It's been hard for her to readjust to Bella City and—marriage. After the unpleasantness of the last two days—well, we both thought she needed a rest. She left about an hour ago."

I said: "Where is she going to stay in San Francisco?"

"I'm sorry, I don't know the address. Bess makes a point of enjoying the utmost personal freedom, and I make a point of allowing it." His pale eyes were watching me, daring me to mention our last meeting.

"When is she coming back?"

"I assume in a week or so. It will depend partly on the friends she's staying with."

"What friends?"

"I can't help you there, either. I don't really know my wife's friends. We've been living apart for the past two years."

He was choosing his words very carefully, as if the slightest mishandling might jar out of them a blast of meaning that would destroy him and his house. It struck me that Bess had left him and wasn't coming back. This was the fact he was concealing from me and Brake, and possibly from himself.

"Why did she come back after those two years?"

"I believe she realized that she had made a mistake in leaving me. Not that you have any license to ask me."

"The doctor's right," Brake said. "Absolutely right. How's she traveling, by the way?"

"By car. She took my car." He added stiffly: "She had my permission to take it."

"Let's see, that's a Chevvie sedan, isn't it, doctor?"

"A 1946 blue Chevrolet sedan."

"And the license?"

"5T1381."

Brake made a note of it. "What route is she taking?"

"I have no idea. Surely you're not proposing to have Mrs. Benning picked up on the highway?"

"First I want to make sure she isn't here."

"You think I've been lying to you?"

"Not a bit. I'm just doing my job. May I have your permission to look through the house?"

"Do you have a search warrant?"

"I do not. I took it for granted you had nothing to hide."

Benning managed to smile. "Of course. I was merely curious." He swung his arm in a quarter circle that ended with his knuckles thumping the wall. "Make free with my demesne, gentlemen."

Brake started up the stairs that rose at the end of the hallway. I went through the outer rooms with Benning, and paused in the examination room. He spoke quietly from the doorway:

"I know my enemies, Mr. Archer, and my wife's enemies. I understand your type, the appetitive man. What you can't have you seek to destroy." His voice was rising like an ill wind, carrying echoes of our previous meeting.

"Why did your wife come back to you?" I said.

"She loved me."

"Then why did she leave you again today?"

"She was afraid."

"Afraid of the Duranos? The police?"

"She was afraid," he repeated.

I looked around the shabby oilcloth walls and the scrubbed linoleum floor. The faucet was still leaking drop by drop into the sink.

"Is this the room where Florie found the blood, doctor?"

"Blood?" he said. "Blood?"

"The day after your wife came back there were spots of blood on the floor. According to Florie."

"Oh, yes. I had an emergency patient that Sunday. Cut finger."

"I suggest that your emergency patient came here late Saturday night. Mrs. Benning brought him to you for treatment. He had a slug in his body instead of a cut finger. His name was Singleton. What happened to him, doctor, did he die on your hands?"

"I had no such patient."

"I suggest that you performed an unreported operation on a dying man, and couldn't save him."

"Have you made that suggestion to Brake?"

"No. I'm not your enemy. I'm not interested in breaches of medical ethics. I'm after a murderer. But I haven't even been able to prove that Singleton was murdered. Was he?"

Our glances met and locked, until Benning disengaged his. "It's not myself I'm concerned about," he said falteringly.

"Your wife? Did she do the shooting?"

He failed to meet my eyes again. Both of us were listening to Brake's unaccompanied footsteps coming down the stairs and through the house.

Brake saw the tension between us as soon as he entered the room:

"What goes on?"

"Very little," I said.

Benning looked at me with gratitude, and drew himself up visibly. "Did you look under all the beds, lieutenant?"

"I did. No women's clothes in the closets, either. You sure your wife isn't planning to stay away?"

"She hasn't many clothes."

Brake crossed the room to the locked closet which I had broken into the night before. He shook the knob with the violence of frustration. "You check this room in here, Archer?"

"It's only a closet," Benning said. "There's nothing inside but my skeleton."

"Your what?"

"It's an anatomical specimen."

"Open up."

Benning went to the closet door with a key-ring jingling in his hand. As he unlocked it, he gave us a bright bitter smile over his shoulder. "You don't seriously think I've locked my wife in here?"

He swung the door open. The sparse head grinned steadfastly, superciliously, from its refuge beyond time. Benning stood back, watching us for signs of shock or surprise. He seemed disappointed when we showed none.

"Mr. Macabre," I said. "Where did he come from?"

"I got him from a medical-supply house." He pointed out a rectangular brass tag attached to one of the ribs: Sunset Hospital Equipment Co., Ltd. I had missed it the night before.

"Not many doctors have these any more, do they?"

"I keep him for a special reason. I worked my way through medical school, and I never received an adequate grounding in anatomy. I've been studying it on my own, with the help of this old boy." He poked the varnished cage of ribs with his finger, and set the whole thing swaying. "Poor old boy. I've often wondered who or what he was. A convicted felon, or a pauper who died in a charity ward? *Memento mori.*"

Brake had been fidgeting. "Let's go," he said suddenly. "I've got work to do."

"There are a couple of other points I want to take up with Dr. Benning."

"Make it fast, then." Brake seemed to have broken through the thin ice, and contracted a case of cold feet. He moved out through the waiting-room as if to detach his authority from me.

The doctor followed Brake, emphasizing the realignment that was taking place. It had been two against him. Now it was two against me.

"I don't really mind, lieutenant. I'd like to satisfy Mr. Archer completely and have it over with. If Mr. Archer can be satisfied." Benning turned to face me in the waiting-room like an actor who has been groping for his part and finally begun to live it.

"There's a conflict of testimony," I said. "Florie Gutierrez says that your wife and Lucy Champion were friends. You claim they weren't. Florie says your wife was out of the house when Lucy was killed yesterday afternoon. You claim she was here with you."

"I can't pretend to be objective in this matter, with my wife's reputation at stake. I'll tell you my own experience of Florida Gutierrez. She's an unmitigated liar. And when my wife discharged her last night—"

"Why did your wife discharge her?"

"Incompetence. Dishonesty and incompetence. The Gutierrez woman threatened to get even, as she put it. I knew she'd go to almost any lengths to damage us. But the lengths she's gone to have surprised even me. There seems to be no limit to human malice."

"Was your wife in the house between five and six yesterday?"

"She was."

"How do you know? You were taking a siesta."

He was silent for nearly half a minute. Brake was watching from the doorway with the air of a disinterested spectator.

"I didn't sleep," Benning said. "I was conscious of her presence in the house."

"But you couldn't see her? It might have been Florie? You can't swear it was your wife?"

Benning took off his hat and inspected its interior as if for a missing idea. He said slowly and painfully: "I don't have to answer that question, or any other question. Even if I were in court—you can't force a man to testify against his wife."

"You volunteered an alibi for her. Incidentally, you haven't proved she is your wife."

"Nothing could be easier." He strode into his consultation room and came back with a folded document that he handed to Brake.

Brake glanced at it, and passed it to me. It was a marriage certificate issued in the State of Indiana on May 14, 1943. It stated that Samuel Benning, aged 38, had been married on that date to Elizabeth Wionowski, aged 18.

Benning took it out of my hands. "And now, gentlemen, it's about time I insisted that my private life, and my wife's, is no affair of yours. Since she isn't here to defend herself, I'll remind you that there are libel laws, and false arrest is actionable in the courts."

"You don't have to remind me." Brake stressed the personal pronoun. "There's been no arrest, no accusation. Thank you for your co-operation, doctor."

Brake slung a look from the door which tightened on me like a rope. We left Benning in the hallway, leaning like a flimsy buttress against the rotting wall. He was pressing the marriage certificate to his thin chest as if it was a love token or a poultice or a banknote, or a combination of all three.

The interior of my car was furnace-hot. Brake pulled off his coat and folded it on his knees. His shirt was blotched with sweat.

"You went too far, Archer."

"I think I didn't go far enough."

"That's because you don't have my responsibility."

I admitted that that was true.

"I can't take chances," he went on. "I can't act without evidence. I got nothing to justify a warrant for Mrs. Benning."

"You've got just as much on her as you have on Alex Norris. He's still in jail."

Brake answered doggedly: "He's being held without charge for twenty-four hours. It's legal. But you can't do that with people like Mrs. Benning. She's a doctor's wife, remember. I stuck my neck out going to Benning at all. He's lived all his life in this town. His father was the high-school principal for twenty years." He added defensively: "Anyway, what have we got on her?"

"You noticed her maiden name in the marriage certificate? Elizabeth Wionowski. The same name as the one in the telegram. She was Durano's woman."

"That don't prove anything about Singleton, even if it was evidence, which it isn't. What I don't see in your story is this idea of a woman changing partners back and forth like a bloody square dance. It don't happen."

"Depends on the woman. I've known women who kept six men on the string at the same time. Mrs. Benning has been alternating three. I have a witness who says she was Singleton's mistress for seven years, off and on. She came back to Benning because she needed help—"

Brake brushed the words like mosquitoes away from his head. "Don't tell me any more. I got to take this careful and slow or I'm up the crick without a paddle."

"You or Norris."

"And don't needle me. I'm handling this case the way I have to. If you can bring in Mrs. Benning to make a statement, okay, I'll listen. But I can't go out and bring her in myself. I can't do anything to the doctor just because his wife went on a trip. Nobody told her not to."

The sweat was running down his slant low forehead, gathering in his eyebrows like dew in a thicket. His eyes were bleak.

"It's your town, lieutenant."

I dropped him at the rear of the City Hall. He didn't ask me what I intended to do next.

chapter 27

IT WAS LATE afternoon when I drove through Arroyo Beach to the ocean boulevard. The palm-lined sand was strewn with bodies like a desert battlefield. At the horizon sea and sky merged in a blue haze from which the indigo hills of the channel islands rose. Beyond them the sun's fire raged on the slopes of space.

I turned south into traffic moving bumper to bumper, fender to fender, like an army in retreat. The arthritic trees cast long baroque shadows down the cemetery hill. The shadow of Durano's house reached halfway across its wilderness of lawn towards the iron fence. I pulled out of the traffic into the entrance to the drive.

The gate was still chained and padlocked. There was a button set in the gatepost under a small weathered sign: RING FOR GARDENER PLEASE. I rang three times, without audible effect, and went back to my car to wait. After a while a small figure came out of the house. It was Una. She moved impatiently down the drive, chunky and squat between the slender coconut palms.

Her gold lamé coat gleamed like mail through the bars of the gate. "What do you want, you?"

I got out of the car and approached her. She looked at me, and at the house, as if invisible wires were jerking at her alternately from each direction. Then she right-about-faced and started away.

"I want to talk about Leo," I said above the traffic noises.

Her brother's name pulled her back to the gate: "I don't understand you."

"Leo Durano is your brother?"

"What if he is? I thought I fired you yesterday. How many times do I have to fire you before you stay fired?"

"Was that the trouble with Max Heiss, that he wouldn't stay fired?"

"What about Max Heiss?"

"He was killed this morning, murdered. Your labor turnover is rapid, and all of your ex-employees are ending the same way."

Her expression didn't change, but her diamonded right hand reached for one of the bars and gripped it. "Heiss had a lot of drunky ideas. If somebody cut him down, it's no affair of mine. *Or* my brother's."

"It's funny," I said, "when I saw Heiss in the morgue I thought of you and Leo. Leo has quite a record in that line."

Her hand left the bar and jumped like a brilliant crustacean to her throat. "You've seen Bess Wionowski."

"We had a little chat."

"Where is she?" Una spoke as if her throat was hurting her.

"Blown again," I said. "You might as well open the gate. We can't talk here."

"I might as well."

She groped in the wide square pocket of her gold coat. I had my finger hooked in the trigger guard of my gun. All she brought out was a key, with which she opened the padlock. I unchained the gate and pushed it open.

Her hand closed on my arm: "What happened to Max Heiss? Did he get sliced, like Lucy?"

"He was put to the torch like Joan of Arc."

"When?"

"Early this morning. We found him in the mountains, in a wrecked car. The car belonged to Charles Singleton, and Heiss was wearing Singleton's clothes."

"Whose clothes?"

Her fingers were biting into me. Contact with her was unpleasant and strange, like being grabbed by the branch of a small spiny tree. I shook her hand off.

"You know him, Una, the golden boy Bess was running with. Somebody blowtorched Heiss and dressed him in Singleton's clothes to make it look as if Singleton died this morning. But we know better, don't we?"

"If you think Leo did it, you're crazy."

"I'm surprised you still use that word in your family."

Her gaze, which had been steady on my face, swerved away. She said with her head down: "Leo was home in bed this morning. I can prove it by his nurse. Leo is a very sick man."

"Paranoia?" I said distinctly. "G.P.I.?"

Her rigid calm tore like a photograph. "Those lying sawbones at the

clinic! They promised me they kept professional secrets. I'll professional-secret them when they send me their next bill."

"Don't blame the clinic. I've seen enough commitment trials to recognize paranoid symptoms."

"You've never seen my brother."

I didn't answer the unasked question. "I'm going to see him now, with you."

"I've taken good care of Leo," she cried suddenly, "with trained nurses all the time, the best of care! The doctor comes every day to see him. I work and slave for that man, making him things he likes to eat, spumoni, minestrone. When I have to, I feed him with my own hands." She choked back the running words and turned away from me, ashamed of the solicitous old woman jostling her other selves.

I put one hand on her stiff elbow and propelled her towards the house. Its red-tiled upper edge cut off the sun. I looked up at the barred window behind which Leo Durano had been receiving the best of care, and heard a silent word repeated like an echo from the wall many times.

Inside the front door, an iron stairway curved in a spiral to the second floor. Una climbed it and preceded me along a dust-littered hallway. Near its end, the large young man in the white smock sat in an armchair beside a closed door.

My presence startled him. "Doctor?" he said to Una.

"Just a visitor."

He shook his cheeks at her. "I wouldn't do it, Miss Durano. He's been hard to handle this afternoon. I had to restrain him."

"Open the door, Donald," Una said.

He produced a key from his tentlike smock. The room contained a bare iron cot and a disemboweled platform-rocker bolted to the floor. A few shreds remained of the drapes that had hung at the barred window. Beside the window, the plaster wall showed handprints, and indentations that could have been made by fists. The inner side of the oak door had been splintered, and repaired with bare oak boards.

Durano was sitting on the floor against the wall in the far corner by the window. His arms, folded in his lap, were sheathed in a brown leather restrainer on which tooth-marks were visible. He looked up at us through soiled black hair that straggled over his forehead. His bleeding mouth opened and closed, trying to trap a word.

The word sounded like: "Forgive."

Una ran across the room to him and went down clumsily on her trousered knees. "We don't treat you good, Leo. Forgive me." She drew his head against her metal torso.

"Forgive," he answered brokenly. "I forgive me. Released without

charge. I told the ragpickers you can't vag an honest man or the son of an honest man, told them I was doing my father's business."

Clasping the mumbling head in both arms, Una looked up at me scornfully. "This is the poor little fellow who committed a murder this morning, eh? Tell him, Donald, where was Leo this morning?"

Donald swallowed painfully. "Police?"

"Close enough," I said.

"He was right in this room. All night and all morning. Every night and morning. Durano don't get around much any more."

"Shut up, you." Una left her brother and advanced on Donald. "No smart cracks, fat boy. He's a better man right now than you'll ever be. You'd still be emptying bedpans for sixty a month if it wasn't for Leo Durano. Mister to you."

He backed away from her, flushed and cowering like a browbeaten German wife. "You ask me a question, Miss Durano."

"Shut up." She passed him like a small cold wind, and hustled off down the corridor.

I said: "Donald. What about Saturday night two weeks ago? Was Durano in his room?"

"I wasn't here. We usually get Saturday nights off."

"We?"

"Me and Lucy before she left. Miss Durano paid me extra to stay last night. He was bad last night."

"You coming?" Una called from the head of the stairs.

She took me to the room with the picture window at the rear of the house. The sun's fires had blazed out of control across the whole western sky and were eating at the sea's edges. Along the shore where the beach curved, a few late swimmers were tossed like matchsticks in a bloody froth of surf. I sat down in a chair against the side wall where I could watch the whole room and its doors and windows.

Seen from inside by daylight, the room was spacious and handsome in an old-fashioned way. Kept up, it might have been beautiful. But the carpets and the surfaces of the furniture were gray with dust, strewn with the leavings of weeks: torn magazines and crumpled newspapers, cigarette butts, unwashed dishes. A bowl of rotting fruit was alive with insects. The wall plants had drooped and died. Cobwebs hung in shaggy strands from the ceiling. It was a Roman villa liberated by Vandals.

Una sat down at the card-table by the big window. The cards with which she and Donald had been playing the night before lay scattered across the table, mixed with a confetti of potato chips. A pair of clouded glasses sat on its edge. Una's hand crept out onto the table and began to gather the cards.

"How long has Leo been insane?" I said.

"What does it matter? You know he didn't kill Heiss."

"Heiss isn't the only one."

"Lucy Champion, then. He wouldn't hurt Lucy. They got along swell till she left. She was a damn good nurse, I'll give her that."

"That isn't why you were so anxious to get her back."

"Isn't it?" She smiled a keen half-smile, as bitter as wormwood.

"How long has he been insane, Una?"

"Since the first of the year. He blew his top for keeps at a New Year's party in the Dial, that's a night-spot in Detroit. He was trying to make the orchestra play the same piece over and over, some piece from an opera. They played it three times and quit. Leo said they were insulting a great Italian composer. He was going to shoot the orchestra leader. I stopped him.

"It was New Year's Eve and everybody thought he was loaded. I knew different. I'd been watching him since summer. He had bad headaches all last year, and along in the fall he was flying off the handle every day. It was Bess set him off, he never should have taken her back. They fought like wildcats all the time. Then he started to lose his memory. He got so he didn't even know his collectors' names."

"Collectors?"

Her hand became still among the half-gathered cards. She uncrossed and recrossed her legs. "He runs a collection agency."

"With a gun?"

"Leo always carried large sums. The gun was for protection. I didn't realize he was dangerous until he tried to use it on that musician. The doctor in Detroit said he was in a hopeless state, he wouldn't live long. I saw I had to get him out of Michigan. I wasn't going to have my brother committed."

"Again."

"*Again*, God damn you, if you know so much."

"So you hired a couple of nurses and moved to California. No doubt reasoning that Californians were expendable, in case he tried to shoot somebody else."

She turned from the card-table to look at my face, try to assess my meaning. "California was *her* idea. Anyway, I don't see why you go on about killing. I keep him under close guard. The idea that Leo did these murders is ridiculous."

"You didn't take it so lightly when I brought it up. You've worked like a dog since I got here to build up his alibi. On top of that you've outlined his defense on a plea of not guilty by reason of insanity, complete with medical witnesses."

"I've been showing you that Leo can't be tried for murder, let alone convicted."

"Why go to all that trouble if the idea is ridiculous?"

She bent forward stiffly in her chair, planting her feet on the floor: "You wouldn't want to harass a poor sick guy. What happens if you tip the cops in? They'll pin a bum rap on him, with his record, or if that doesn't work they'll send him away."

"There are worse places than a state hospital." I was sitting in one.

"I can't face it," she said. "He was in before and I saw how they treated him. He's got a right to spend his last days with somebody that loves him."

Though she said them with great intensity, the words fell flat. I studied her head, slanting square and hard out of the gold coat. On the window side the sun cast her face in rosy relief. Its other side was in shadow so deep by contrast that she looked like half a woman. Or a woman composed half of flesh and half of darkness.

"How long do the doctors give him?"

"Not more than a year. You can ask them at the clinic. Two years at the outside."

"Anywhere from one hundred to three hundred grand."

"What the hell do you mean by that?"

"My information is that Leo draws two to three grand a week from a numbers ring in Michigan. That adds up to a possible total of three hundred grand in two years, before taxes if you pay taxes."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Money," I said. "Don't tell me you're not handling Leo's money. I wouldn't believe it."

An irrepressible faint smile appeared on her mouth, as if I had flattered her subtly. "I have big expenses, very big expenses."

"Sure you have. Mink, diamonds, an ocean-front estate. They all cost money."

"Medical expenses," she said, "you wouldn't believe."

"Sure. You've got to keep him alive. The income lasts as long as he does. As long as you keep him under wraps, he's a boss racketeer on Sabbatical leave drawing his weekly take. But when he dies, or the cops lock him up, or news of his condition gets back to Michigan, it's finished for you. You're a pretty hard type but I don't see you going back to Michigan and fighting a war of succession with his mob. If you could do that, you wouldn't have come to me in the first place."

She sat in silence, shivering a little inside the metal coat. Then she took up the gathered half of the deck and flung it down at random on the table. Brushed by her sleeve, a glass fell to the floor and broke.

"You didn't figure this out for yourself," she said in cold still anger. "It was Bess Wionowski put you onto it."

"She may have helped."

"That's Wionowski's gratitude." A hard pulse kicked like a tiny animal tangled in the veins of her left temple. "She was on her uppers, last year when Leo took her back. We ransomed her out of a cell in Detroit city jail and treated her like a queen. When we came out here to Cal, we even let her choose the town to live in. I might of known she had a reason for picking this place."

"Singleton," I said.

The name acted on Una like an electric shock. She jumped to her feet, kicking out at the shards of glass on the floor as if she hated everything actual. "The filthy disloyal filly. Where is she now? Where is she? If you got her hid out waiting for her cut, you can go back and tell her I don't pay off to squealers."

She stood above me in a spiteful rage, less than half a woman now, a mean little mannish doll raving ventriloquially.

"Come down to earth," I said. "You'll give yourself a migraine. Neither of us wants your dirty money."

"If my money's so dirty, what are you sucking around for?"

"Just the truth, sweetheart. You know what happened to Singleton, if anybody does. You're going to tell me."

"And if I don't?"

"You tell the cops. I'll have them here before dark."

She sat on the edge of her chair and looked out at the setting sun. Half down on the horizon, its red hemisphere was like a bird's giant eye on which the inflamed blue underlid was shutting slowly.

"How did it happen?" I said.

"Give me a chance to think—"

"You've had two weeks. Now talk."

"It was all Bess Wionowski's fault. The big estate and the high living weren't good enough for that Chicago chippie. Way last spring she started dating this guy from the Hill, this Singleton scion. I figured she knew him from when she lived here during the war. Before long she was spending nights with him. I tried to keep it from Leo but he found out about it some way. He has his lucid times, anyway he had until two weeks ago. It was a Saturday night, and Bess was up the mountain with her highfalutin boy friend, set to make beautiful music. Leo found out where she was, from Lucy Champion, I guess. Lucy was supposed to be looking after him that night. When he blew off, she couldn't handle him. Lucy called a taxi and went up the hill to warn the—lovers." The word had an obscene sound in Una's mouth.

"Where were you?"

"Downtown. When I got back Leo was waiting for me with a gun. He'd taken the springs off his bed and broken the door down and found the gun in my room. He made me drive him up to Singleton's studio, forced me at gunpoint to do it. Singleton came out of the door, and Leo shot him in the guts. I grabbed Leo from behind as soon as he turned that gun away from me. It took all four of us to tie him."

"All four?"

"Me and Bess and Lucy. Lucy was there. And Singleton."

"Singleton was shot, you said."

"He could still navigate, the last I saw of him. I left right away when we got Leo under control. I had to get Leo home."

"So you don't know what happened to Singleton?"

"No. They all three dropped out of sight. I hired Max Heiss to find out if Singleton was alive or dead. He watched the Singleton house all last week. On Thursday Lucy turned up there, sniffing around for the reward I guess. Heiss rode the bus back to Bella City with her and found out more than he ever turned in to me. Friday night he reported to me and claimed he lost Lucy in Bella City. I knew he was crossing me because he dropped a hint about the shooting. He was going to let me buy him off and then collect the Singleton reward besides."

"So you killed him for being greedy."

"Think again."

"You were the one with everything to lose. Lucy and Heiss were the ones to lose it for you."

"I still have everything to lose. Would I hand you all this on a silver platter if I wasn't clear?"

"Who else had a reason to kill them?"

"Bess," she said harshly. "Lucy was in touch with Bess in Bella City, I could tell by talking to Lucy. Max Heiss was on her track. How do I know what Bess did with Singleton? Maybe he died on her hands and that made her accessory. Bess couldn't stand a police investigation. Bess has a record going back ten years."

I stood up and moved towards her and stood over her: "Did you remind Bess of her record, up at Singleton's cabin, after your brother shot him? Is that why she dropped out of sight and took Singleton into hiding?"

"Figure it out for youself."

"You scared her into hushing it up, didn't you? Purely out of sisterly devotion, of course, to protect your brother, and his income."

She shifted restlessly in the chair, doubling her legs under her to tighten her defenses. "What other reason would I have?"

"I've been casting around for one," I said. "I thought of something

that happened in Los Angeles about fifteen years ago, to a man and his wife and their son. The son was a Mongolian idiot, and the man hated his wife for giving him that son. When the boy was ten or twelve years old, his father bought a shotgun and took him out on the desert and taught him to shoot. The boy had brains enough to pull the trigger of a shotgun. One night the father handed him the gun and told him to shoot his mother. She was asleep in bed. The boy blew her head off, being eager to please. He wasn't prosecuted. But his father was, though he hadn't physically committed the murder. He was convicted on a first-degree charge and put away with cyanide."

"Too bad for him."

"Too bad for anybody who tries to do murder by proxy. If you incite an insane person to commit a crime you're legally guilty of it. Did you know that was the law when you drove your brother up the mountain to Singleton's cabin and handed him a gun?"

She looked up at me with loathing, the muscles weaving and dimpling around her mouth. On the left side of her head where the knotted veins jerked, her face had swelled lopsided, as if moral strain had pushed or melted it out of shape. The light from the window fell on her like visible heat from an open furnace-door.

"You'll never bum-rap me," she said. "You haven't even got a body. You don't know where golden boy is any more than I do."

Her statement turned at the end into a question. I left the question turning like a knife in her brain.

chapter 28

LIGHTS SHONE LIKE wit in a dowager behind the windows of the Palladian villa. The green spectrum of its lawns and trees was deepening around it into solid green darkness. I parked under the porte-cochere and yanked at the old fashioned bell-pull that hung by the side entrance.

A stout woman in an apron opened the door. Her hand left a deposit of white flour on the doorknob. "What is it?"

"Is Miss Treen in?"

"I think she's busy. Who shall I say is calling?"

"Mr. Archer."

She permitted me to enter the hallway. I started to sit down on an elegant bowlegged chair, caught her backward look of disapproval, and remained standing. The Chinese gentleman with the wise earlobes was pursuing his timeless journey along the wall, from the lowlands across a river valley into the highlands and up the snowcapped mountain to his shrine. There were seven of him, one for each stage of the journey. There was only one of me, and my earlobes felt inadequate.

Sylvia appeared at the end of the hall, pale and absent-looking in a black suit like a uniform. "I'm so relieved you've come."

"How's Mrs. Singleton?"

"Not well, I'm afraid. This afternoon was too much for her. The police phoned from Bella City to say that Charles's car had been found with his body in it. They wanted her to make a formal identification. Before she was ready to leave, they called again. The body had been identified as someone else, some detective. I'm so glad it wasn't you."

"So am I. It was Max Heiss."

"Yes. I found that out. Why was he killed, do you know? Why was he dressed in Charles's clothes?"

"Somebody wanted to have it appear that Charles died in an accident this morning. The body was burned to make it hard to identify."

Her mouth was pulled thin across her teeth in horror. "There are such dreadful things in the world. Why?"

"There are dreadful things in people's heads. This one is easier to explain than some. If Charles died in an accident this morning, he couldn't have died in a shooting two weeks ago."

"You mean that he did die two weeks ago? You can't mean that," she softly prompted the irreversible facts.

"Charles is probably dead, Sylvia. I know he was shot. I think he died of it."

"Who would shoot Charles?"

"He was mixed up with a woman named Bess. She had other lovers. One of them caught Charles with her in his studio, and shot him. Bess had a police record, and she was forced to cover up the shooting. She took Charles to her husband, who is a doctor in Bella City. Charles died, apparently. No one has seen him since."

"*She* has," Sylvia whispered.

"Who?"

"The woman, Bess. She phoned here a little while ago. I'm certain it was the same woman."

"You spoke to her?"

"Yes. She insisted on talking to Mrs. Singleton, but Mrs. Singleton was in no condition. The woman didn't identify herself. She didn't have to. I knew from what she said that she was—Charles's mistress."

"What did she say?"

"That she could give us information."

"Five thousand dollars' worth?"

"Yes. She claimed to know where Charles is."

"Did you arrange to meet her?"

"I invited her to come here, but she wouldn't. She said she'd phone again at seven to fix a meeting-place. We must have the money ready for her in cash, in unmarked bills. Fortunately Mrs. Singleton has the cash on hand. She's been holding it in readiness ever since she posted the reward."

"Mrs. Singleton is going through with this, then."

"Yes, I advised her to. I may be quite wrong. I've had no one to turn to. The woman particularly warned me not to call in the police or Mrs. Singleton's detective agency or her lawyers. She said that if we did, the deal was off."

"She didn't mention me, though."

"If only you would stand by, Mr. Archer. I'm not equipped to handle this kind of—transaction. I wouldn't even know what to ask for in the way of proof."

"What sort of proof did she offer?"

"Proof that she knows where Charles is. She didn't describe its nature and I hadn't the presence of mind to question her about it. The whole thing took me by surprise. I lacked the wit, even, to ask her if Charles was dead." She hesitated, then said in a rush of feeling: "Of course I meant to ask her. I was afraid to, I suppose. I put it off. Then the operator asked her to deposit more money, and she hung up."

"It was a long distance call?"

"I had the impression it was from Los Angeles."

"How much did the operator ask for?"

"Forty cents."

"Probably Los Angeles. Bess didn't give her name?"

"No, but she called him Charlie. Not many people did. And she knew my name. Charles told her about me, I guess." She bit her lip. "When I realized that, I felt sort of let down. It wasn't simply her calling me by my first name. She *condescended* to me, as if she knew all about me—how I felt about Charles."

"You'd feel better if you knew all about her."

"Do you?"

"Nobody does. She's crowded several lives into her first twenty-five years."

"Is that all she is, twenty-five? I imagined she was much older, older than Charles."

"Bess grew up early and fast. She was married in her teens to a man twice her age. He brought her out here during the war. She met Charles here in 1943."

"So long ago," she said desolately. Her loss of Charles was final, and retroactive. "Long before I knew him."

"Wilding saw her with Charles in 1943."

"He didn't tell me."

"He wouldn't. Since then she's been back and forth across the country, in and out of jail—"

"You said she had a husband. What about him?"

"She broke his spirit years ago. She uses him when she has to, when she has nothing better to do with herself."

"I don't—I can't understand—Charles's taking up with such a woman."

"She's a fine-looking wench. And she was safely married to a man who wouldn't divorce her."

"But he's such an idealist. His standards are so high. Nothing was ever good enough for Charles."

"It's possible he was out of touch with his own standards. I never met Charles, but he sounds flawed to me—a man trying all his life to get hold of something real and not succeeding." I didn't know for sure whether my candor came from concern for the living girl or jealousy of the dead man. "That bullet in the guts was probably the realest thing that ever happened to him."

Her hazel eyes were troubled, but transparent as water in a well. "You mustn't speak of him in that way."

"Speak no ill of the dead?"

"You don't know that he is dead." She cupped her left breast gravely in her right hand. "I feel, here, that he is alive."

"I interviewed a witness today who saw him shot."

"How can I feel so strongly that he is alive?"

"He may be," I said without conviction. "My evidence isn't conclusive."

"Yet you won't let me have any hope. I think you wish him dead."

I touched the back of her hand, which still lay over her breast. "I never saw a girl with more goodness. I'd hate to see you waste it all on the memory of a guy who never gave a thought to anybody but himself."

"He wasn't like that!" She was flushed and radiant with anger. "He was beautiful."

"Sorry," I said. "I'm tired. I shouldn't try to mastermind other people's lives. It never works out." I sat down in the bowlegged chair and let the thoughts in my head string off in whirling darkness.

Her touch on my shoulder straightened me up. She looked down at me with a smile of wise innocence:

"Don't be sorry, and don't be angry with me. I wasn't exactly nice."

Nice was her middle name, but I kept that to myself. I looked at my wristwatch:

"It's nearly seven now. What are you going to say to her?"

"Whatever you think. Won't you take the call?"

"She knows my voice. You talk to her. Tell her you have the money. You'll buy her information, provided it's backed up by proof. If she's in Los Angeles or within driving distance, make an appointment for ten tonight, later if she insists. She's to go to West Hollywood and park in front of 8411½ Sunset Boulevard. You'll contact her there."

"I?"

"We both will." I printed the address in my notebook, and tore the leaf out for her. "No matter how she gripes, don't let her choose the meeting-place."

"Why not?"

"You're going to be with me. Bess may or may not be dangerous herself, but she has dangerous friends."

She read the address I had printed. "What place is this?"

"My office. It's a good safe place to talk to her, and I have built-in mikes. I don't suppose you take shorthand?"

"*Pas trop.* I can take some sort of notes."

"How's your memory? Repeat the instructions I gave you."

She did, without an error, and said with the air of a child remembering her manners:

"Come into the library, Mr. Archer. Let me make you some tea while we're waiting. Or a drink?"

I said that tea would be fine. The telephone rang before I got a taste of it. It was Bess calling from Los Angeles.

chapter 29

AT HALF PAST nine we were in my West Hollywood office. I called my answering service and was informed that a Mr. Elias McBratney of Beverly Hills had phoned twice on Saturday and would phone again on Monday. James Spinoza, Jr., of Spinoza Beach Garb, wished me to call him back as soon as possible about those shortages. A lady who declined to give her name had tried to reach me four times between eight ten and nine twenty. I thanked the operator and said I would take my own calls until further notice.

I turned out the desk lamp. The inner office was dimly lit by the rectangular white beam that fell from the outer room through the one-way panel in the glass door. A changing light thrown up from the Boulevard silhouetted the girl against the window.

"Look at the lights all up the sides of the hills," she said. "I've never seen this city at night. It's so new and aspiring."

"New anyway."

I stood behind her watching the cars run by in the road. I felt very close to Sylvia in the half-dark, and very conscious of time. The headlights flashed and disappeared like a bright succession of instants plunging out of darkness into darkness.

"Some day we'll have to jack it up and put a foundation under it."

"I like it the way it is," she said. "New England is all foundation and nothing else. Who cares about foundations?"

"You do, for one."

She turned, and her shoulder brushed me like a friendly movement of the darkness itself. "Yes, I do. You have foundations, Archer, don't you?"

"Not exactly. I have a gyroscope arrangement. I'm afraid to let it stop spinning."

"That's better than foundations. And I don't believe you're afraid of anything at all."

"Am I not." I emitted a cynical-uncle chuckle which turned into a real laugh. Sylvia didn't join in.

The telephone on the desk rang sharply. I reached for it and spoke into the mouthpiece:

"Hello."

No answer. Only a faint electric murmur, the sound of thin wire in thin space. A click at the other end. Dead line.

I dropped the telephone into its cradle. "Nobody there."

"Perhaps it was the woman. Bess." Sylvia's face in the upward light from the window was white and enormous-eyed.

"I doubt it. She has no way of knowing this is my address."

"Will she come, do you think?"

"Yes. She needs the money for a getaway." I patted my fat breast-pocketful of bills.

"Getaway," Sylvia said, like a tourist picking up a foreign word. "What a wretched life she must have led, and still be leading. Oh, I hope she comes."

"Is it so important?"

"I have to know about Charles, one way or the other." She added under her breath: "And I want to see her."

"You'll be able to." I showed her the one-way panel in the door, and the earphones wired to the mike in the outer room. "You stay in here and take your notes. I'll keep her in the other room. I don't expect any trouble."

"I'm not afraid. I was afraid of everything for so very long. I've suddenly got over it."

At eight minutes to ten, a blue Chevrolet sedan passed slowly on the far side of the road, in the direction of Los Angeles. The face of the woman behind the wheel was caught in a photoflash of approaching headlights.

"That was Bess. You stay in here now and be still. Away from the window."

"Yes."

Closing doors behind me, I ran downstairs to the street. At two minutes to ten the Chevrolet came back and pulled up to the curb directly opposite the doorway where I was waiting. I crossed the sidewalk in three steps, opened the car door, pushed my gun into the woman's side. She released the emergency brake and raced the engine. I plucked the key out of the ignition switch. She tried to scratch my face. I locked her fingers.

"Calm down, Bess. You're caught."

"When haven't I been." She drew a long sighing breath. "I could stand it better before I started bumping into you. Well, little man, what now?"

"The same as before, except that you're going to do your talking to me."

"Who says I am?"

"Five grand says it."

"You mean you've got the money for me?"

"When you earn it."

"And I can go free?"

"If you're reasonably clean, and I don't mean vice-squad stuff."

She leaned close to study my eyes as if her future lay behind them. I leaned away.

"Let me see the money."

"Upstairs in my office."

"What are we waiting for then?"

She came out of the car, her body full and startling in a yellow jersey dress with a row of gold buttons down the front. I frisked her on the stairs and found no gun and burned my hands a little. But in the lighted room I saw that she was losing what she had had. Her past was coming out on her face like latent handwriting. Her powder and lipstick, alkali and orange in the fluorescent light, were cracking and peeling off. Grime showed in the pores of her nose and at the sides of her neck. Dissolution was working in her rapidly like a fatal disease she had caught from her husband that day.

She felt my look cold against her, and reached up automatically to straighten her hair. It was streaked greenish yellow and black. I guessed she had been working on it with peroxide half the afternoon, trying to reconstruct her image in a cheap hotel mirror. And I wondered what the girl behind the one-way panel was thinking.

"Don't look at me," Bess said. "I've had a bad day."

She sat in a chair by the outer door, as far from the light as possible, and crossed her legs. Nothing could happen to legs.

"You've had a bad day coming," I said. "Now talk."

"Don't I get a peek at the money?"

I sat down facing her and placed the five brown-paper-wrapped packages on the table between us. There was a microphone built into the table lamp, and I switched it on.

"Five grand, you said?"

"You're dealing with honest people. You can take my word for it."

"How much do I have to give you?"

"The whole thing. All you know."

"That would take years."

"I wonder. We'll start with something simple. Who killed Singleton?"

"Leo Durano blasted him." Her clouded blue gaze had returned to the packages of money. "Now I guess you want to know who Leo Durano is."

"We've met. I know his record."

She was beyond surprise. "You don't know Leo like I know Leo. I wish I never set eyes on him."

"He was picked up for contributing about ten years ago. Were you the minor?"

"Uh-huh. He was the connection I told you about, the one with the hat-check concessions in the clubs. We both got sneezed the same night, and they found out we lived in the same hotel room. He got off easy. The court doctor said he was batty, I could of told them that. They stuck him away in the booby-hatch for a spell, until Una talked him out of there. She's been talking him out of jams since he was a kid."

"Not this one," I said. "Now what about Singleton?"

"Me and Charlie?"

"You and Charlie."

"He was the one big love of my life," her cracked lips said. Her bleached hands moved down her smooth jersey body from breasts to thighs, wiping out a memory, or reviving it. "I met him too late, after I married Sam. Sam and I were living together in Arroyo Beach, and Sam was all work and no play, and that was never for me. Charlie picked me up in a bar. He had everything, looks and class and an Air Force officer's uniform. Real class. Class was the one thing I really wanted. I went with him the first night and it worked like magic. I didn't know what it was before Charlie showed me. Leo and Sam and the others never even scratched my surface.

"Charlie had to go back to Hamilton Field but he'd fly down weekends. I waited for those weekends. Then Sam went to sea and I couldn't even remember what he looked like. I can't remember now. It was different when Charlie went. He went all the way to Guam. He couldn't fly back from there. The waiting stretched out, and he didn't write.

"Sam wrote though, and Sam was the first to come back. I made the best of a bad job. After all I was married to the guy. We settled down in Bella City and I cooked his chops for him and said hello how are you to the cheesy patients he had. I never mentioned Charlie to him but I guess he figured it out from the things I didn't say. It wasn't any good at all after Sam came back. I stuck it for one year, keeping track of Charlie in the Arroyo newspaper and marking off the days on the calendar. I crossed off every day for a year. I got up early in the morning to cross them off and then I went back to bed.

"One Saturday morning I didn't go back to bed. I got on a bus and

rode to Arroyo Beach and phoned Charlie and we started over again, nearly every weekend. That was the summer of forty-six, I guess. It didn't last. He said good-bye in September and went back to Boston to take a course at Harvard Law School. I stayed with Sam that winter. It was a long winter. Summer was good when it came but it didn't last. It never lasted. Next year when the rains came in the valley and I saw that green stuff on the hills I couldn't stick it. I couldn't even hear what Sam was saying any more; it went through my head like wind.

"I got on a train for New York and from there to Boston Massachusetts. Charlie was living in his own apartment in Belmont, but he wasn't glad to see me. He said I was part of his California vacations, I didn't fit into his Boston life. Scat. I told him what he was, and I walked out of there with nothing on but a dress. It was March, and it was snowing. I was going to walk into the river because the name of it was the Charles River and that would drive him crazy. I hoped.

"I looked at the river for a while with the snowflakes falling into it. Then I walked to the end of the subway and rode downtown. I didn't even rate a cold out of it. For a long time then I lived on Scollay Square, getting back at Charlie. I phoned him once to tell him what I was doing. He hung up on me. That night it was the third rail in the subway I looked at. I stood and looked at it for over an hour, and I couldn't move forward or back.

"A character in a boiled shirt saw me watching the third rail and picked me up. He turned out to be an unemployed ballroom-dancer from Montreal. Paul Theuriet. I supported him the rest of that year while we tried to work up an act together. Ever hear of Lagauchetière Street in Montreal?"

"I never did."

"It's rugged, and so was the act. Paul said I could make a dancer out of myself. God knows I tried. I was too clumsy or something. *He* was old and gouty in the joints. We did get ourselves booked into a few third-string clubs in Niagara Falls, Buffalo, Toledo. Then we were stranded in Detroit. I was waiting table in a beer joint, trying to raise enough money for limber-legs to open a dance studio, getting nowhere. We tried the old badger a couple of times. Paul fumbled it and ran out to Canada, left me holding the bag. That was where Leo came into my life again."

"It's about time."

"You asked for all of it," she said with a wry stubborn smile. This was her saga, all she had to show for her life, and she was going to tell it her own way:

"Leo heard that I was in the Detroit clink for extortion. He was going good again, a medium big gun in Michigan numbers. He had pull with the

cops, and he hadn't forgotten me. He sprung me out of that rap. After all those years, I moved back in with Leo and his sister. No class, but the chips. I was in the chips."

"So you lived happily ever after, and that's why you're not here."

"It isn't funny," she said. "Leo started to have the fantods, worse than ever. It got so bad I sent some money to Sam, for an insurance policy. I thought if it got too bad I could come out here and retire on Sam. They didn't know about Sam."

"They?"

"Leo and his sister. She handled the money for Leo after his memory faded. Leo blew his top the end of last year. He tried to gun an orchestra leader for no good reason at all. We took him to a doctor and the doctor said he'd been sick for twenty years and was in the final stage of paresis. We couldn't keep him in Michigan after that. He had enemies in the organization. The money boys and the underdogs with the irons were both turning against him. Leo never laid anything on the line for his share of those banks. All he ever put up was his hard-nose reputation and his connections. If they knew he lost his mind they'd cut him out, or cut him down. So it was California here we came. I sold Una on Arroyo Beach.

"Ever since Boston, when Charlie Singleton kicked me out of his life, I had this certain idea busting my brain. He thought I was from hunger, and I thought if I went back to Arroyo Beach with money on my back I'd make him squirm. Pass him on the street and pretend I didn't know him. Anyway, that was my idea. When I did see him again, I did a quick reverse and there I was back at the old stand, Saturday nights in his studio. I didn't care about anything he did to me in the past. He was the only man I liked to be with. It went along like old times until a couple of weeks ago the lid blew off. When Leo found out about Charlie and me." She paused, her eyes like fogged blue steel.

"Did he find out from Lucy?"

"Not a chance. Lucy was my one real friend in that house. Besides, she was a nurse. She had psychic—psychiatric training. She wouldn't pull a raw deal like that on one of her patients. She was the one who warned us Leo was on the warpath. She came up the mountain in a cab one jump ahead of him."

"Who sent Leo on the warpath?"

"Una did, at least that's what we figured afterwards. Lucy drove me over to the hotel to keep my date with Charlie. When Lucy got back to the house, Una cross-questioned her about where I was and who I was with. Lucy wouldn't talk, and Una fired her. I guess Una knew all about it already. She turned Leo loose and sicked him on us.

"Maybe the fantods ran in the family. Anyway, she must have been far gone with whatever it was she had, to give Leo a loaded gun and a green light. I didn't understand it at the time. I was in the studio with Lucy when it happened. I looked out the window and saw Leo in the station-wagon with Una, and Charlie walking out to him, not realizing the danger. Charlie went right up to the station-wagon, and Leo shot him. Charlie fell down and got up again. Una took Leo's gun away from him. We all stepped in and got him under control. Then Una put on an act about how Leo forced her to bring him there. I believed her, then. I was scared not to believe her. I've always been scared of Una.

"She said the shooting had to be hushed up, or else. It had to be as if nothing happened. No hospital for Charlie, and him doubled up in his car. I was afraid to argue with Una. I took what clothes I had in the studio and drove Charlie and Lucy over the pass to Bella City.

"I'd been to see Sam Benning a couple of times in the spring and summer, in case I ever needed him. He thought I was working in L.A., modeling clothes. We were on pretty good terms, but I couldn't tell Sam the truth: that one boyfriend shot the other and Sam was to make it all come right in the end. I played it as strong as I could with Sam. I told him Charlie had made a rough pass and I shot him myself. Lucy backed me up. Charlie was past talking by then.

"Sam believed me. He made me promise if he fixed Charlie up I had to stick with him in Bella City from then on and be a wife to him. I promised. He had me over a barrel.

"Maybe the wound was worse than it looked at first, or Sam isn't much of a surgeon. He blamed Lucy for what happened, said she fouled up the operation trying to assist him. Sam was always a man to shift blame onto other people's shoulders. Anyway Charlie died that night, right on the table in the examination room, before he came out of the ether."

"Who gave him the anesthetic?"

"I don't know, I wasn't there. I couldn't stand to see him bleeding."

"You're a strange woman, Bess."

"I don't think so. How could I watch Sam cutting into him? Charlie was my boy. I loved him."

"I'll tell you what's really strange," she added after an interval: "The people you love are never the ones that love you. The people that love you, the way Sam loved me, they're the ones you can't love. Sam was a good man when I first knew him. But he was too crazy about me. I couldn't love him, ever, and he was too smart to fool. It ruined him.

"He did a wild thing that Sunday morning. There was Charlie dead in his house, and Sam thinking I had shot him. I couldn't change my story at that late date. Sam was afraid he was going to lose me again, and it

pushed him over the edge. He butchered Charlie, cut him up into pieces like a butcher. He locked the cellar door on me, wouldn't let me down there. I could tell from the noises what he was doing. There was a laundry tub and an old gas stove down there that his mother left behind her when she died. When he was through, there was nothing but bones left. He spent the next three nights working on them, putting them together with wire. Sam always was good with his hands. When it was all wired together and varnished and dried, he riveted on a tag from a medical-supply house and hung the thing in a closet. He said that was the skeleton in my closet and if I ever left him—" She drew a fingernail across her throat.

There was a muffled cry from the inner room.

"And that's your proof?" I said loudly.

"You'll find it in the closet off his examination room. Unless you already did?"

"What did he do with Charlie's car?"

"Hid it in the barn, under some old boards and tarpaulins. I helped him."

"Did you help him burn Max Heiss, when Max found the car?"

Bess didn't hear me. An intermittent sobbing and gasping rose and fell in the inner room. Bess was listening to it, the flesh haggard on the bones of her face like wet clay drooping on an armature.

"You crossed me, you," she said.

Something fell softly and heavily against the inside of the glass-paneled door. I went to it. The door was hard to open because Sylvia had fainted against it. I reached around its edge and turned her onto her back. The metal earphones pincered her closed white face. Her eyes came open:

"I'm sorry. I'm such a fool."

I started for the water cooler. Bess was at the outer door, fumbling with the Yale lock. The packages of bills were gone from the table.

"Sit down," I said to her straining yellow back. "I haven't finished with you."

She didn't answer. All her remaining energy was focused on escape. The lock snapped back. The door opened inwards with Una pushing behind it from the hallway.

Una's mouth was wet. Her eyes were blind with the same darkness I had seen on her brother's face. The gun in her hand was real.

"I thought you'd be here with him. This is the payoff, Wionowski, to squealers and false friends."

"Don't do it." Bess was leaning off balance against the opening door, still bent on escape.

I moved sideways to the wall, bringing my gun out fast, not fast

enough. Bess staggered backwards under the blow of the first shot from Una's gun and went down under the second. The twin explosions smashed like bones in my head.

I shot to kill. Una died on her feet, of a smudged hole in the temple, and thumped the floor. I held Sylvia's hand until the police arrived. Her hand was ice cold at first. After a while it was a little warmer, and I could feel her blood beating.

chapter 30

THE STARRED SKY ARCHED like a crystal roof over the town. The valley floor was like the floor of a cave, the mountains blunt stalagmites against its glimmering walls. Once I got off the highway, the streets of Bella City were deserted. Its midnight buildings, leached of color by the alkali moonlight, stood like gray shadows on their own black shadows.

Parking at Benning's curb, I rang the bell and heard its complaint inside the house. A door creaked open at the rear of the hallway. Benning passed through its widening shaft of light and shut the door behind him. His face appeared above the cardboard patch in the corner of the window. It was crumpled and streaked like a discarded charcoal-sketch of itself.

He opened the front door. "What is it? Why have you come here?"

"Let me see your hands, doctor." I showed him the gun in mine.

He stepped out onto the porch, bulky in a zippered blue coverall, and held out his empty hands.

"They're dirty," he said. "I've been doing some cleaning in the house."

"Your wife is dead."

"Yes. I know. They phoned me from Los Angeles. I'm getting ready to go." He glanced down at my gun as if it were an obscenity that shouldn't be mentioned. "Perhaps they sent you to fetch me?"

"I came on my own."

"To spy on my grief, Mr. Archer?" he asked with broken irony. "You'll be disappointed. I can't feel grief, not for her. I've suffered too much for her." He turned up his dirty palms and looked down into them. "I have nothing." His fists closed slowly on moonlight. "Who is this woman who murdered her?"

"Una Durano. She's dead, too. I shot her."

"I'm grateful to you for that." His words were as insubstantial as his double fistful of moonlight. "Why did she do it to Bess?"

"She had various reasons. Your wife was a witness to the Singleton shooting, for one."

"Bess? A witness?"

"She was there when Singleton was shot."

"Who on earth was Singleton?"

"You know as well as I do, doctor. He was your wife's lover almost as long as you were married to her."

Benning looked up and down the empty street. "Come inside," he said nervously. "I only have a few minutes, but we can talk there."

He stood aside to let me enter first, maintaining a formal politeness like a wire-walker afraid to look down. I waved him in with my gun and followed him through the waiting-room into the consultation room. The inside of the house was suffocating after the chilly night air.

I pulled his swivel chair into the middle of the room. "Sit down, away from the desk."

"You're very hospitable," he said with his down-dragging smile. "Bess was, too, in her way. I won't deny that I knew of her affair with Singleton. Or that I was glad she shot him. It seemed fitting that she should be the one to destroy that arrogant young man."

"Bess didn't destroy him."

"I'm afraid you're mistaken. Now that Bess is dead, I'm free to tell you the truth. She confessed to me that she shot him."

"She was lying to you."

He stood wide-legged and stubborn under the light, shaking his long head from side to side. "She couldn't have been lying. No one would lie about such a thing."

"Bess did. It was the only way she could persuade you to take care of him. The crime was actually committed by Una Durano. Bess was a witness, as I said."

He slumped into the chair. "Do you know that, for a fact?"

"I couldn't prove it in court. I don't have to. Una is dead, along with the competent witnesses, Singleton and Lucy and Bess."

"Did this woman murder them all? What kind of a woman was she?"

"As hard and nasty as they come. But she didn't kill them all. Bess was the only one she killed. She thought Bess had turned informer against her."

"You said she murdered Singleton."

"Not exactly."

"You said she committed the crime," he insisted.

"The crime was attempted murder, done by proxy, but you finished Singleton off. I think he'd still be alive if you hadn't got your knife into him."

Benning's body jerked backwards. His large grimy hands moved towards each other across his denim-covered abdomen. The thumb and forefinger of one hand plucked at the coverall zipper as if it were a sutured incision in his flesh.

He found his voice: "This is utter nonsense. You can't prove either the fact or the intent. Singleton's death was pure accident. I couldn't stop the internal hemorrhage."

"You destroyed the body. That carries a lot of weight."

"If you could prove it. But there is no body. You have nothing." It was an echo of what he had said about himself.

"Singleton's bones will do."

"Bones?"

"The skeleton you rigged to hold Bess in line. It's turned into a booby trap."

"You've left me far behind."

I moved the gun in my hand, drawing his attention to it. "Open the closet in the examination room."

He rose, still holding his middle where my accusation had hit him. I thought he was too willing. The closet was empty. He shut the door and leaned against it. His long-toothed melancholy grin mimicked the grin of the absent skull.

"Where is it, doctor?"

"I suppose Bess took it with her. That would be fitting, too."

There was an iron grate set in the baseboard beside the closet door. Benning's glance rested on it involuntarily, a second too long. The grate was the closed outlet of an old-fashioned hot-air system. Holding my gun on Benning, I stooped to touch it. It was warm, and under it I could sense the minute vibrations of fire.

"Show me the furnace."

Benning stood flat against the door, his eyes gleaming palely, as though they belonged to a tormented animal crouched inside of him. He drooped suddenly, but I distrusted his docility. It was taut and dangerous. I held my gun close to his back as we went through the house and down the basement stairs.

The light was still on in the basement. A naked bulb suspended on a wire cast a dingy yellow glare on shelves of empty jars, broken furniture, newspapers and magazines, generations of cobwebs. A rusty three-burner gas plate squatted on a bench beside the stairs, and a copper boiler, dented and green with age, hung on the wall above it. Benning avoided that corner of the basement.

In the far corner, behind a rough board partition, an old cast-iron furnace was breathing like a bull. I used my toe to open the fire door, and saw what lay in the heart of the fire: a skull licked by flames in a phœnix nest of bones.

Beside me, Benning was lost in contemplation. The orange light of the fire played feebly on the lower part of his face. He seemed for an instant to be young and smiling.

"Put it out."

He came to himself with a start. "I can't. I don't know how."

"Find a way, and be quick about it. Those bones are worth money to me."

He attached a garden hose to a tap in the hot water tank, and turned its stream on the fire. Steam sizzled and gushed from the furnace door. He emerged from it coughing, and sat down on a pile of kindling against the board partition. I looked into the blackened firebox at five thousand dollars' worth of charred bones, all that remained of the golden boy. It was a hell of a way to make money, selling dead men's bones. I kicked the iron door shut.

With his eyes closed, his head lolling back against the boards, Benning looked like another dead man.

"Are you ready to give me a full confession?"

"Never," he said. "They can't convict me."

"They have three tries, remember."

"Three?"

"If it was only Singleton, there'd be some room for doubt, even for sympathy. He took Bess away from you. You had some justification for letting the scalpel slip in his bowels."

He said in a deeper voice: "My enemy was delivered into my hands." Then opened his eyes in bewilderment, as if he had talked in his sleep and waked himself from nightmare.

"That doesn't apply to Lucy. She tried to help you."

Benning laughed. With a great effort, he throttled the laugh and imposed silence on himself.

"Before Bess was killed tonight, she told me Lucy assisted at the operation. Lucy was in a position to know who and what killed Singleton. When things closed in on her—landlady trouble, no job, detectives tailing her—she thought of selling her knowledge to Singleton's family. But she made the mistake of coming to you yesterday and giving you a chance before she did anything final.

"If she could get money from you, she wouldn't have to sell you out or involve herself in a murder case. You gave her the money you had on hand, enough to buy a train ticket and get out of town. You also hedged

against the chance that she wouldn't take that train, by filching her motel-key out of her purse. Lucy missed the train, in every sense. When she went back to the motel, you were waiting in her room. She tried to defend herself with a knife. You were too strong for her."

"You can't prove it," Benning said. Bowed far forward, he was staring down at the wet concrete floor.

"A witness will turn up. Somebody must have seen you go out, even if Florie didn't. You must have passed somebody who knows you between here and the Mountview Motel, going or coming. If I have to, I'm going to canvass the whole population of the town."

His head came up as if I had tightened a knot under his jaw. He knew he had been seen. "Why do you want to do this? Why do you hate me?" He wasn't asking me alone. He was asking all the people who had known him and not loved him in his life.

"Lucy was young," I said. "She had a boy friend who wanted to marry her. They honeymooned in the morgue, and Alex is still in jail, sweating out your rap for you. Do you think you're worth the trouble you've caused?"

He didn't answer me.

"It's not just the people you've killed. It's the human idea you've been butchering and boiling down and trying to burn away. You can't stand the human idea. You and Una Durano don't stack up against it, and you know it. You know it makes you look lousy. Even a dollar-chaser like Max Heiss makes you look lousy. So you have to burn his face off with a blowtorch. Isn't that what you did?"

"It's not true. He demanded money. I had no money to give him."

"You could have taken your medicine," I said. "That never occurred to you. It hasn't yet. When Max found the Buick in your barn, that made him your enemy. Naturally he had to die. And when he came back for his money, you were ready for him, with Singleton's clothes and a blowtorch and a can of gasoline. It must have seemed like a wonderful plan, to get rid of Heiss and in the same motion establish Singleton's death by accident. But all it accomplished was to tip Bess off on what you'd done. As soon as I told her about the car he was found in, she realized you killed Max. And she left you."

"She left me, yes. After all I'd done for her."

"Not for her. For you. You've killed two men and a woman because they threatened your security. You'd have killed Bess if she hadn't got out fast. She didn't tell me that, but I think she knew it. She was the one you wanted to kill from the start, if you hadn't been afraid."

He shuddered, covering his eyes with his spread fingers. "Why are you torturing me?"

"I want a confession."

It took him several minutes to bring himself under control. When he lowered his hands, his face had smoothed and thinned. His eyes seemed smaller and darker. No animal was using them.

He got up awkwardly from the pile of wood and took a halting step towards me:

"I'll give you a confession, Mr. Archer. If you'll let me have access to my drug cabinet, for just a moment?"

"No."

"It will save time and trouble, for all of us."

"It's too easy. I've promised myself one satisfaction out of this case. To see you go in and Alex Norris come out."

"You're a hard man."

"I hope so. It's the soft ones, the self-pity boys like you, that give me bad dreams." I had had enough of that basement, cluttered with broken objects, wet and hot and squalid with broken desires. "Let's go, Benning."

Outside, the flawed white moon was higher among the stars. Benning looked up at them as if the night had really become a cave of shadows, the moon a clouded port and the stars peepholes into a terrible brightness:

"I do feel grief for her. I loved her. There was nothing I wouldn't do."

He started down the veranda steps, his short black shadow dragging and jerking at his heels.

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ROSS MACDONALD

The Zebra-Striped Hearse

Ross Macdonald's real name was Kenneth Millar. Born near San Francisco in 1915 and raised in Vancouver, British Columbia, Millar returned to the U.S. as a young man and published his first novel in 1944. He served as the president of the Mystery Writers of America and was awarded their Grand Master Award, as well as the Mystery Writers of Great Britain's Silver Dagger Award. He died in 1983.

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The Zebra-Striped Hearse

ROSS MACDONALD

The Zebra-Striped Hearse

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To Harris W. Seed

The people in this novel are fortunately all imaginary, and were invented without reference to any actual people living or dead.

—R. M.

The Zebra-Striped Hearse

chapter 1

SHE WAS WAITING at the office door when I got back from my morning coffee break. The women I usually ran into in the rather dingy upstairs corridor were the aspiring hopeless girls who depended on the modeling agency next door. This one was different.

She had the kind of style that didn't go on with her make-up, and she was about my age. As a man gets older, if he knows what is good for him, the women he likes are getting older, too. The trouble is that most of them are married.

"I'm Mrs. Blackwell," she said. "You must be Mr. Archer."

I acknowledged that I was.

"My husband has an appointment with you in half an hour or so." She consulted a wrist watch on which diamonds sparkled. "Thirty-five minutes, to be precise. I've been waiting for some time."

"I'm sorry, I didn't anticipate the pleasure. Colonel Blackwell is the only appointment I have scheduled this morning."

"Good. Then we can talk."

She wasn't using her charm on me, exactly. The charm was merely there. I unlocked the outer door and led her across the waiting room, through the door marked Private, into my inner office, where I placed a chair for her.

She sat upright with her black leather bag under her elbow, touching as little of the chair as possible. Her gaze went to the mug shots on the wall, the faces you see in bad dreams and too often on waking. They seemed to trouble her. Perhaps they brought home to her where she was and who I was and what I did for a living.

I was thinking I liked her face. Her dark eyes were intelligent, and capable of warmth. There was a touch of sadness on her mouth. It was a

face that had known suffering, and seemed to be renewing the acquaintance.

I said in an exploratory way: "'Abandon hope all ye who enter here.'"

She colored slightly. "You're quick at catching moods. Or is that a stock line?"

"I've used it before."

"So has Dante." She paused, and her voice changed in tone and rhythm: "I suppose I've placed myself in a rather anomalous position, coming here. You mustn't imagine my husband and I are at odds. We're not, basically. But it's such a destructive thing he proposes to do."

"He wasn't very specific on the telephone. Is it divorce he has on his mind?"

"Heavens, no. There's no trouble of that sort in our marriage." Perhaps she was protesting a little too vehemently. "It's my husband's daughter I'm concerned — that we're both concerned about."

"Your stepdaughter?"

"Yes, though I dislike that word. I have tried to be something better than the proverbial stepmother. But I got to Harriet very late in the day. She was deprived of her own mother when she was only a child."

"Her mother died?"

"Pauline is still very much alive. But she divorced Mark years ago, when Harriet was eleven or twelve. Divorce can be terribly hard on a little girl, especially when she's approaching puberty. There hasn't been much I could do to make Harriet feel easier in the world. She's a grown woman, after all, and she's naturally suspicious of me."

"Why?"

"It's in the nature of things, when a man marries for the second time. Harriet and her father have always been close. I used to be able to communicate with her better before I married him." She stirred uneasily, and shifted her attention from herself to me. "Do you have any children, Mr. Archer?"

"No."

"Have you ever been married?"

"I have, but I don't quite see the relevance. You didn't come here to discuss my private life. You haven't made it clear why you did come, and your husband will be turning up shortly."

She looked at her watch and rose, I think without intending to. The tension in her simply levitated her out of the chair.

I offered her a cigarette, which she refused, and lit one for myself. "Am I wrong in thinking you're a little afraid of him?"

"You're completely wrong," she said in a definite voice, but she seemed to have some difficulty in continuing. "The thing I'm afraid of is

letting him down. Mark needs to be able to trust me. I don't want to do anything behind his back."

"But here you are."

"Here I am." She relapsed into the chair.

"Which brings us back to the question of why."

"I'll be frank with you, Mr. Archer. I don't like Mark's battle plan"—she made the phrase sound ironic —"and I've told him so. I've done some social work, and I have some conception of what it means to be a young woman in the contemporary world. I believe it's best to let nature take its course. Let Harriet marry the man, if her heart is set on him. But Mark can't see it my way at all. He's fiercely opposed to the marriage, and determined to do something drastic."

"And I'm the something drastic."

"You're one version of it. Guns and horsewhips have also been mentioned. Not," she added quickly, "that I take everything he says seriously."

"I always take gun talk seriously. What do you want me to do?"

Her gaze had returned to the pin-ups on the wall. Killers, embezzlers, bigamists, and con men looked at her with unabashed eyes. She shifted her bag to her lap.

"Well, I can hardly ask you to turn him down. It would do no good, anyway. He'd simply find another detective and set him loose on Harriet and—her friend. All I really hoped to do was prepare you for the situation. You'll get a very one-sided view of it from Mark."

"I've gotten a very vague one from you, so far."

"I'll try to do better," she said with a small tight smile. "About five weeks ago Harriet went to Mexico. Her announced intentions were to visit her mother—Pauline lives on Lake Chapala—and to do some painting. But the fact is that she's not on very good terms with her mother, and her talent as a painter will never set the world on fire. I think she went to Lake Chapala deliberately to find a man.

"Any man. If that sounds cynical, let me add that I might have done the same thing myself, under the circumstances."

"What circumstances?"

"I mean her father's second marriage, to me. It's been quite apparent that Harriet hasn't been happy living with us. Fortunately for her, for all of us, her little Mexican expedition was successful. She found a friend, and brought him back alive."

"Does this live one have a name?"

"His name is Burke Damis. He's a young painter. While he's no great social prize—my husband tends to overrate the social—he is quite personable. He has no money, which is another of Mark's objections to him, but he does have artistic talent—a great deal more talent than

Harriet possesses, as she knows. And, after all, she'll have money enough for both of them. With his talent and—virility, and her money and devotion, I'd say they had the makings of a marriage."

"She'll have money?"

"Quite a lot of money, and quite soon. One of her aunts left her a substantial trust fund. Harriet comes into it when she's twenty-five."

"How old is she now?"

"Twenty-four. Old enough to know her own mind and live her own life and get out from under Mark's domination—" She paused, as if the strength of her feeling had carried her too far.

I prompted her: "Domination is a strong word."

"It slipped out. I don't mean to malign my husband behind his back. He's a good man, according to his lights, but like other men he's capable of emotional foolishness. This isn't the first affair of Harriet's he's tried to break up. He's always succeeded before. If he succeeds this time, we could end up with a very sad girl on our hands." Her face was alive with passionate identification.

"You really care about Harriet, Mrs. Blackwell."

"I care about all three of us. It isn't good for her to live in her father's shadow. It isn't good for me to sit and watch it—I'm not the sitting and watching type—and it will become less good if it goes on. Harriet is so vulnerable, really, and Mark is such a powerful personality."

As if to illustrate this remark, a large masculine voice was raised in the outer room. I recognized it from Blackwell's telephone call. He said through the translucent glass door: "Isobel, are you in there?"

She jumped as if lightning had struck her, not for the first time. Then she tried to make herself small.

"Is there a back way out?" she whispered.

"I'm afraid not. Shall I get rid of him?"

"No. It would only lead to further trouble."

Her husband was fumbling at the door, his featureless shadow moving on the glass. "I wondered what you were up to when I saw your car in the parking lot. Isobel?"

She didn't answer him. She moved to the window and looked out through the slatted blind over Sunset Boulevard. She was very slim and tense against the striated light. I suppose my protective instinct was aroused. I opened the door a foot or so and slid out into the waiting room and closed the door behind me.

It was my first meeting with Colonel Blackwell. His phone call the day before had been our only contact. I'd looked him up afterward and learned that he was a Regular Army officer who had retired soon after the war from an undistinguished career.

He was a fairly big man who had begun to lose his battle with age. His brown outdoorsman's face made his white hair seem premature. He held himself with ramrod dignity. But his body had started to dwindle. His Shetland jacket hung loose around the shoulders; the collar of his shirt was noticeably large for his corded neck.

His eyebrows were his most conspicuous feature, and they gave him the air of an early Roman emperor. Black in contrast with his hair, they merged in a single eyebrow which edged his forehead like an iron rim. Under it, his eyes were unexpectedly confused.

He tried to shout down his own confusion: "I want to know what's going on in there. My wife is in there, isn't she?"

I gave him a vacant stare. "Your wife? Do I know you?"

"I'm Colonel Blackwell. We spoke on the telephone yesterday."

"I see. Do you have any identification?"

"I don't need identification! I vouch for myself!"

He sounded as though a yelling demon, perhaps the tormented ghost of a master sergeant, had taken possession of him. His tanned face turned red, then lavender.

I said at the purple end of the yell: "Are you really Colonel Blackwell? The way you came bulling in here, I thought you were a crank. We get a lot of cranks."

A woman with very tall pink hair looked in from the corridor, knotting her imitation pearls in her fist. It was Miss Ditmar, who ran the modeling agency:

"Is it all right?"

"Everything's under control," I said. "We were just having a yelling contest. This gentleman won."

Colonel Blackwell couldn't bear to be talked about in this fashion. He turned his back on me and stood with his face to the wall, like a plebe being braced. Miss Ditmar waved her hand benevolently and departed under her hive of hair, trailing a smog of perfume.

The door to the inner office was open now. Mrs. Blackwell had recovered her composure, which was mainly what I'd had in mind.

"Was that a mirage?" she said.

"That was Miss Ditmar in the next office. She was alarmed by the noise. She's very nervous about me all the time."

"I really must apologize," Mrs. Blackwell said with a glance at her husband, "for both of us. I shouldn't have come here. It's put you very much in the middle."

"I've been in the middle before. I rather enjoy it."

"You're very nice."

Like a man being rotated by invisible torque, Blackwell turned and

let us see his face. The anger had drained out of it and left it open. His eyes had a hurt expression, as though his young wife had rejected him by complimenting me. He tried to cover this with a wide painful smile.

"Shall we start over, in a lower key?"

"A lower key would suit me, Colonel."

"Fine."

It did something for him to be called by his rank. He made an abrupt horizontal gesture which implied that he was in charge of himself and the situation. He cast an appraising glance around my waiting room as if he was thinking of having it redecorated. With a similar glance at me, he said: "I'll join you shortly in your office. First I'll put Mrs. Blackwell in her car."

"It isn't necessary, Mark. I can find my way—"

"I insist."

He offered her his elbow. She trudged out holding onto it. Though he was the big one and the loud one, I had the impression that she was supporting him.

Through the venetian blind I watched them emerge from the street entrance onto the sidewalk. They walked very formally together, like people on their way to a funeral.

I liked Isobel Blackwell, but I was sort of hoping her husband wouldn't come back.

chapter 2

HE CAME BACK, though, wearing a purged expression which failed to tell me what had been purged, or who. I took the hand he offered me across my desk, but I went on disliking him.

He was sensitive to this—a surprising thing in a man of his temper and background—and made an oblique attempt to get around it: "You don't know the pressures I live under. The combined forces of the females in my life—" He paused, and decided not to finish the sentence.

"Mrs. Blackwell was telling me about some of the pressures."

"So she said. I suppose she meant no harm in coming here. But dammit, if a man's wife won't go through channels," he said obscurely, "who will?"

"I understand the two of you disagree about your prospective son-in-law."

"Burke Damis is not my prospective son-in-law. I have no intention of letting the marriage go through."

"Why not?"

He glared down at me, moving his tongue around under his lips as if he had foreign objects between his teeth. "My wife has the standard female illusion that all marriages are made in heaven. Apparently she's infected you with it."

"I asked a simple question, about this particular marriage. Won't you sit down, Colonel?"

He sat stiffly in the chair his wife had occupied. "The man's a fortune-hunter, or worse. I suspect he's one of those confidence men who make a career of marrying silly women."

"Do you have any evidence along those lines?"

"The evidence is on his face, in his manner, in the nature of his relationship with my daughter. He's the kind of man who would make her miserable, and that's putting it gently."

Concern for her had broken through into his voice and changed its self-conscious tone. He wasn't the stuffed shirt I had taken him for, or at least the stuffing had its human elements.

"What about their relationship?"

He hitched his chair forward. "It's completely unilateral. Harriet is offering him everything—her money, her love, her not inconsiderable attractions. Damis offers nothing. He *is* nothing—a man from nowhere, a man from Mars. He pretends to be a serious painter, but I know something about painting and I wouldn't hire him to paint the side of a barn. Nobody's ever heard of him, and I've made inquiries."

"How extensive?"

"I asked a fellow at the art museum. He's an authority on contemporary American painters. The name Burke Damis meant nothing to him."

"The woods are full of contemporary American painters, and there are always new ones coming up."

"Yes, and a lot of them are fakes and impostors. We're dealing with one here, with this Burke Damis. I believe the name's an alias, one he picked out of a hat."

"What makes you think so?"

"The point is, he's given me no reason to think otherwise. I tried to question him about his background. His answers were evasive. When I asked him where he came from, he said Guadalajara, Mexico. He's obviously not Mexican and he admitted having been born in the States, but he wouldn't say where. He wouldn't tell me who his father was or what he'd done for a living or if he had any relatives extant. When I pressed him on it, he claimed to be an orphan."

"Maybe he is. Poor boys can be sensitive, especially under cross-examination."

"He's no boy, and I didn't cross-examine him, and he's got the sensitivity of a wild pig."

"I seem to have struck out, Colonel."

He sat back in his chair, unsmiling, and ran his hand over his head. He was careful not to dislodge the wave in his meticulously brushed white hair.

"You make it very clear that you think I'm taking the wrong approach to this problem. I assure you I am not. I don't know how much my wife told you, or how much of what she told you was true—objectively true. The fact remains that my daughter, whom I love dearly, is a fool about men."

"Mrs. Blackwell did mention," I said carefully, "that a similar situation had come up before."

"Several times. Harriet has a great desire to get married. Unfortunately she combines it with a genius for picking the wrong man. Don't misunderstand me, I'm not opposed to marriage. I want my daughter to get married to the right man, at the proper time. But this idea of rushing into it with a fellow she barely knows—"

"Exactly how long has she known Damis?"

"No more than a month. She picked up with him in Ajijic, on Lake Chapala. I've visited Mexico myself, and I know what kind of floaters you can get involved with if you're not careful. It's no place for an unattached young woman. I realize now I shouldn't have let her go down there."

"Could you have stopped her?"

A shadow stained his eyes. "The fact is I didn't try. She'd had an unhappy winter, and I could see she needed a change. I was under the impression she would stay with her mother, my former wife, who lives in Ajijic. I should have known better than to depend on Pauline. I naturally supposed she'd surround her with the appropriate social safeguards. Instead she simply turned her loose on the town."

"Forgive my bluntness, but you talk about your daughter as though she wasn't responsible. She isn't mentally retarded?"

"Far from it. Harriet is a normal young woman with more than her share of intelligence. To a great extent," he said, as if this settled the matter, "I educated her myself. After Pauline saw fit to abandon us, I was both father and mother to my girl. It grieves me to say no to her on this marriage. She's pinned her hopes of heaven to it. But it wouldn't last six months.

"Or rather it would last six months—just long enough for him to get his hands on her money." He propped his head on his fist and peered at me sideways, one of his eyes half closed by the pressure of his hand. "My wife doubtless told you that there is money involved?"

"She didn't say how much."

"My late sister Ada set up a half-million-dollar trust fund for Harriet. She'll come into active control of the money on her next birthday. And she'll have at least as much again when I—pass away."

The thought of his own death saddened him. His sadness changed perceptibly to anger. He leaned forward and struck the top of my desk so hard that the pen-set hopped. "No thief is going to get his paws on it!"

"You're very certain in your mind that Burke Damis is one."

"I know men, Mr. Archer."

"Tell me about the other men Harriet wanted to marry. It may help me to understand the pattern of her behavior." And the pattern of her father's.

"They're rather painful to contemplate. However. One was a man in his forties with two wrecked marriages behind him, and several children. Then there was a person who called himself a folk singer. He was a bearded nonentity. Another was an interior decorator in Beverly Hills—a nancy-boy if I ever saw one. All of them were after her money. When I confronted them with the fact, they bowed out more or less gracefully."

"What did Harriet do?"

"She came around. She sees them now as I saw them from the beginning. If we can keep her from doing something rash, she'll see through Damis eventually, just as I do."

"It must be nice to have X-ray eyes."

He gave me a long black look from under his formidable eyebrow. "I resent that remark. You're not only personally insulting but you seem decidedly lukewarm about my problem. Apparently my wife really got to you."

"Your wife is a very charming woman, and possibly a wise one."

"Possibly, in some situations. But Damis has her hoodwinked she's only a woman after all. I'm surprised that you should be taken in, however. I was told that you run one of the best one-man operations in Los Angeles County."

"Who told you that?"

"Peter Colton, of the D.A.'s office. He assured me I couldn't find a better man. But I must say you don't exhibit much of the bloodhound spirit."

"You may have enough of it for both of us."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"You've got the case all wrapped up and tied with a noose before I've started on it. But you haven't given me any concrete evidence."

"Getting the evidence is your job."

"If it's there. I'm not going to cook up evidence, or select it to confirm you in your prejudices. I'm willing to investigate Damis on the understanding that the chips fall where they fall."

He threw his Roman-emperor look around my office. It bounced off the drab green filing cabinet with the dents in it, riffled the flaking slats of the Venetian blind, and found the ugly pin-ups on the wall all guilty as charged.

"You feel you can afford to lay down terms to your prospective clients?"

"Certain terms are always implied. Sometimes I have to spell them out. I have a license to lose, and a reputation."

His face had entered the color cycle again, starting with pink. "If you consider me a threat to your reputation—"

"I didn't say that. I said I had one. I intend to keep it."

He tried to stare me down. He used his face like an actor, making his brow horrendous, converting his eyes into flinty arrowheads pointed at me between slitted lids. But he grew tired of the game. He wanted my help.

"Of course," he said in a reasonable tone, "I had nothing in mind but a fair, unprejudiced investigation. If you got any other impression, you misread me. You realize my daughter is very dear to me."

"I can use a few more facts about her. How long has she been back from Mexico?"

"Just a week."

"This is the seventeenth of July. Does that mean she returned on the tenth?"

"Let me see. It was a Monday. Yes, she flew back on Monday, July tenth. I met them at the airport around lunchtime."

"Damis was with her?"

"He was very much with her. It's what all the trouble is about."

"Just what kind of trouble has there been?"

"Nothing overt, yet. We've had some—ah—discussions in the family. Harriet has been quite obstinate, and Isobel, as you know, is on the side of the lovebirds."

"You've talked to Damis?"

"I have, on two occasions. The three of us had lunch at the airport last Monday. He did a good deal of talking, about theories of painting and the like. Harriet sat there enthralled. I was not impressed.

"But it was the second time we met that I really began to smell a rat. He came to dinner Saturday night. Harriet had already confided to me that they were planning marriage, so I made an occasion to talk to him alone. It was then he gave me all those evasive answers. On one point at least he wasn't evasive. He admitted that he didn't have a dime. At the same time he was ogling around my house as if he already owned it. I told him that would happen only over my dead body."

"You told him that?"

"Later," he said. "After dinner. He'd made himself highly obnoxious at the table. I mentioned that the Blackwell family name embodies three centuries of tradition, going back to the early days of the Massachusetts colony. Damis seemed to think it was funny. He made a satiric remark about the Colonial Dames—my mother was one, as it happens—and announced that he was bored by such traditions. I said in that case he would certainly be bored as my son-in-law, and he agreed.

"But later I surprised the fellow in my bedroom. He was actually fingering through my wardrobe. I asked him what he thought he was doing

there. He answered flippantly that he was making a study of how the other half lives. I said that he would never find out, not at my expense or the expense of any member of my family. I invited him to leave my house and while he was at it to vacate my other house which he is occupying. But Harriet came rushing in and made me countermand—withdraw the suggestion."

"Damis is living in a house that belongs to you?"

"Temporarily. Harriet talked me into it the first day. He needed a place to paint, she said, and I agreed to let him use the beach house."

"And he's still there?"

"I assume he is. They're not even married, and he's already scrounging on us. I tell you, the man's an operator."

"He doesn't sound like a very smooth one to me. I've known a few painters. The young unrecognized ones have a special feeling about accepting things from other people. They live off the country while they do their work. All most of them want is a north light and enough money to buy paints and eat."

"That's another thing," he said. "Harriet's given him money. I happened to glance through her checkbook yesterday, shortly after I phoned you." He hesitated. "I don't normally pry, but when it's a question of protecting her—"

"Just what are you trying to protect her from?"

"Disaster." His voice sank ominously. "Complete and utter personal disaster. I've had some experience of the world, and I know what can come of marrying the wrong person."

I waited for him to explain this, wondering if he meant his first wife. But he failed to satisfy my curiosity. He said: "Young people never seem to learn from their parents' experience. It's a tragic waste. I've talked to Harriet until I was blue in the face. But the fellow's got her completely under his thumb. She told me Saturday night that if it came to a showdown between me and Damis, she would go with him. Even if I disinherited her."

"The subject of disinheritance came up?"

"I brought it up. Unfortunately I have no ultimate control over the money she has coming from her aunt. Ada would have been well advised to leave the money permanently in my keeping."

This struck me as a doubtful proposition. Blackwell was a sad and troubled man, hardly competent to play God with anybody's life. But the sadder and more troubled they were, the more they yearned for omnipotence. The really troubled ones believed they had it.

"Speaking of money," I said.

We discussed my fee, and he gave me two hundred dollars' advance and the addresses of his houses in Bel Air and Malibu. He gave me something else I hadn't thought of asking for: a key to the beach house, which he detached from his key ring.

chapter 3

IT WAS IN a small isolated settlement north of Malibu. Far down below the highway under the slanting brown bluffs, twelve or fifteen houses huddled together as if for protection against the sea. It was calm enough this morning, at low tide, but the overcast made it grey and menacing.

I turned left off the highway and down an old switchback blacktop to a dead end. Other cars were parked here against a white rail which guarded the final drop to the beach. One of them, a new green Buick Special, was registered to Harriet Blackwell.

A wooden gangway ran from the parking area along the rear of the houses. The ocean glinted dully through the narrow spaces between them. I found the one I was looking for, a grey frame house with a peaked roof, and knocked on the heavy weathered door.

A man's voice grunted at me from inside. I knocked again, and his grudging footsteps padded across the floorboards.

"Who is it?" he said through the door.

"My name is Archer. I was sent to look at the house."

He opened the door. "What's the matter with the house?"

"Nothing, I hope. I'm thinking of renting it."

"The old man sent you out here, eh?"

"Old man?"

"Colonel Blackwell." He pronounced the name very distinctly, as if it was a bad word he didn't want me to miss.

"I wouldn't know about him. A real-estate office in Malibu put me onto this place. They didn't say it was occupied."

"They wouldn't. They're bugging me."

He stood squarely in the doorway, a young man with a ridged wash-

board stomach and pectorals like breastplates visible under his T-shirt. His black hair, wet or oily, drooped across his forehead and gave him a low-browed appearance. His dark blue eyes were emotional and a bit sullen. They had a potential thrust which he wasn't using on me.

The over-all effect of his face was that of a boy trying not to be aware of his good looks. Boy wasn't quite the word. I placed his age around thirty, a fairly experienced thirty.

He had wet paint on his fingers. His face, even his bare feet, had spots of paint on them. His jeans were mottled and stiff with dried paint.

"I guess he has a right, if it comes down to that. I'm moving out any day." He looked down at his hands, flexing his colored fingers. "I'm only staying on until I finish the painting."

"You're painting the house?"

He gave me a faintly contemptuous look. "I'm painting a picture, *amigo*."

"I see. You're an artist."

"I work at the trade. You might as well come in and look around, since you're here. What did you say your name was?"

"Archer. You're very kind."

"Beggars can't be choosers." He seemed to be reminding himself of the fact.

Stepping to one side, he let me into the main room. Except for the kitchen partitioned off in the corner to my left, this room took up the whole top floor of the house. It was spacious and lofty, with a raftered ceiling and a pegged oak floor that had been recently polished. The furniture was made of rattan and beige-colored leather. To my right as I went in, a carpeted flight of steps with a wrought iron railing descended to the lower floor. A red brick fireplace faced it across the room.

At the far end, the ocean end, on the inside of the sliding glass doors, an easel with a stretched canvas on it stood on a paint-splashed tarpaulin.

"It's a nice house," the young man said. "How much rent do they want from you?"

"Five hundred for the month of August."

He whistled.

"Isn't that what you've been paying?"

"I've been paying nothing. *Nada*. I'm a guest of the owner." His sudden wry grin persisted, changing almost imperceptibly to a look of pain. "If you'll excuse me, I'll get back to work. Take your time, you won't disturb me."

He walked the length of the room, moving with careful eagerness like an animal stalking prey, and planted himself in front of the easel. I was a

little embarrassed by his casual hospitality. I'd expected something different: another yelling match, or even a show of violence. I could feel the tension in him, as it was, but he was holding it.

A kind of screaming silence radiated from the place where he stood. He was glaring at the canvas as if he was thinking of destroying it. Stooping quickly, he picked up a traylike palette, squizzled a brush in a tangle of color, and with his shoulder muscles bunched, stabbed at the canvas daintily with the brush.

I went through the swinging doors into the kitchen. The gas stove, the refrigerator, the stainless steel sink were all sparkling clean. I inspected the cupboards, which were well stocked with cans of everything from baked beans to truffles. It looked as though Harriet had been playing house, for keeps.

I crossed to the stairway. The man in front of the easel said: "Augh!" He wasn't talking to me. He was talking to his canvas. Stepping softly, I went down the stairs. At their foot a narrow door opened onto outside steps which led down to the beach.

There were two bedrooms, a large one in front and a smaller one in the rear, with a bathroom between them. There was nothing in the rear bedroom but a pair of twin beds with bare mattresses and pillows. The bathroom contained a pink washbowl and a pink tub with a shower curtain. A worn leather shaving kit with the initials B.C. stamped on it in gold lay on the back of the washbowl. I unzipped it. The razor was still wet from recent use.

The master bedroom in front, like the room above it, had sliding glass doors which opened onto a balcony. The single king-sized bed was covered with a yellow chenille spread on which women's clothes had been carefully folded: a plaid skirt, a cashmere sweater, underthings. A snakeskin purse with an ornate gold-filled clasp that looked Mexican lay on top of the chest of drawers. I opened it and found a red leather wallet which held several large and small bills and Harriet Blackwell's driving license.

I looked behind the louvered doors of the closet. There were no women's clothes hanging in it, and very few men's. The single lonesome suit was a grey lightweight worsted number which bore the label of a tailor on Calle Juares in Guadalajara. The slacks and jacket beside it had been bought at a chain department store in Los Angeles, and so had the new black shoes on the rack underneath. In the corner of the closet was a scuffed brown samsonite suitcase with a Mexicana Airlines tag tied to the handle.

The suitcase was locked. I hefted it. It seemed to have nothing inside.

The door at the foot of the stairs opened behind me. A blonde girl wearing a white bathing suit and dark harlequin glasses came in. She failed to see me till she was in the room with me.

"Who are you?" she said in a startled voice.

I was a little startled myself. She was a lot of girl. Though she was wearing flat beach sandals, her hidden eyes were almost on a level with my own. Smiling into the dark glasses, I gave her my apologies and my story.

"Father's never rented the beach house before."

"He seems to have changed his mind."

"Yes, and I know why." Her voice was high and small for so large a girl.

"Why?"

"It doesn't concern you."

She whipped off her glasses, revealing a black scowl, and something else. I saw why her father couldn't believe that any man would love her truly or permanently. She looked a little too much like him.

She seemed to know this; perhaps the knowledge never left her thoughts. Her silver-tipped fingers went to her brow and smoothed away the scowl. They couldn't smooth away the harsh bone that rose in a ridge above her eyes and made her not pretty.

I apologized a second time for invading her privacy, and for the unspoken fact that she was not pretty, and went upstairs. Her fiancé, if that is what he was, was using a palette knife to apply cobalt blue to his canvas. He was sweating and oblivious.

I stood behind him and watched him work on his picture. It was one of those paintings concerning which only the painter could tell when it was finished. I had never seen anything quite like it: a cloudy mass like a dark thought in which some areas of brighter color stood out like hope or fear. It must have been very good or very bad, because it gave me a *frisson.*

He threw down his knife and stood back jostling me. His gymnasium smell was mixed with the sweeter smell of the oils. He turned with a black intensity in his eyes. It faded as I watched.

"Sorry, I didn't know you were there. Have you finished looking around?"

"Enough for now."

"Like the place?"

"Very much. When did you say you were moving?"

"I don't know. It depends." A troubled expression had taken the place of the singleness that was his working look. "You don't want it before August, anyway."

"I might."

The girl spoke from the head of the stairs in a carrying voice: "Mr. Damis will be out of here by the end of the week."

He turned to her with his wry, self-mocking smile. "Is that an order, Missy Colonel?"

"Of course not, darling. I never give orders. But you know what our plans are."

"I know what they're supposed to be."

She came toward him in a flurried rush, her plaid skirt swinging, the way a child moves in on a loved adult. "You can't mean you've changed your mind again?"

He lowered his head, and shook it. The troubled expression had spread from his eyes to his mouth.

"Sorry, kid, I have a hard time making decisions, especially now that I'm working. But nothing's changed."

"That's wonderful. You make me happy."

"You're easily made happy."

"You know I love you."

She had forgotten me, or didn't care. She tried to put her arms around him. He pushed her back with the heels of his hands, holding his fingers away from her sweater.

"Don't touch me, I'm dirty."

"I like you dirty."

"Silly kid," he said without much indulgence.

"I like you, love you, eat-you-up, you dirty."

She leaned toward him, taller in her heels than he was, and kissed him on the mouth. He stood and absorbed her passion, his hands held away from her body. He was looking past her at me. His eyes were wide open and rather sad.

chapter 4

HE SAID WHEN she released him: "Is there anything else, Mr. Archer?"

"No. Thanks. I'll check back with you later."

"If you insist."

Harriet Blackwell gave me a peculiar look. "Your name is Archer?"

I acknowledged that it was. She turned her back on me, in a movement that reminded me of her father, and stood looking out over the grey sea. Like a man stepping under a bell jar which muffled sound and feeling, Damis had already returned to his painting.

I let myself out, wondering if it had been a good idea to put in a personal appearance at the beach house. I found out in a moment that it hadn't been. Before I reached my car, Harriet came running after me, her heels rat-tat-tatting on the wooden gangway.

"You came here to spy on us, didn't you?"

She took hold of my arm and shook it. Her snakeskin bag fell to the ground between us. I picked it up and handed it to her as a peace offering. She snatched it out of my hand.

"What are you trying to do to me? What did I ever do to you?"

"Not a thing, Miss Blackwell. And I'm not trying to do anything to you."

"That's a lie. Father hired you to break it up between me and Burke. I heard him talk to you yesterday, on the telephone."

"You don't have very good security at your house."

"I have a right to protect myself, when people connive against me."

"Your father thinks he's protecting you."

"Oh, certainly. By trying to destroy the only happiness I'll ever know or want." There was a lilt of hysteria in her voice. "Father pretends to

love me, but I believe in his secret heart of hearts he wishes me ill. He *wants* me to be lonely and miserable."

"That's not very sensible talk."

She shifted her mood abruptly. "But what you're doing is very sensible, I suppose. Sneaking around other people's houses pretending to be something different from what you are."

"It wasn't a good idea."

"So you admit it."

"I should have gone about it in a different way."

"You're *cynical*." She curled her lips at me youngly. "I don't know how you can bear to live with yourself."

"I was trying to do a job. I bungled it. Let's start over."

"I have nothing to say to you whatever."

"I have something to say to you, Miss Blackwell. Are you willing to sit in the car and listen to me?"

"You can say it right out here."

"I don't want interruptions," I said, looking back toward the beach house.

"You don't have to be afraid of Burke. I didn't tell him who you are. I don't like to upset him when he's working."

She sounded very much like a young wife, or almost-wife. I made a comment on this. It seemed to please her.

"I love him. It's no secret. You can write it down in your little black book and make a full report of it to Father. I love Burke, and I'm going to marry him."

"When?"

"Very soon now." She hid her secret behind a hushed mysterious look. Perhaps she wasn't sure she had a secret to hide. "I wouldn't dream of telling you when or where. Father would call out the National Guard, at least."

"Are you getting married to please yourself or spite your father?"

She looked at me uncomprehendingly. I had no doubt it was a relevant question, but she didn't seem to have an answer to it.

"Let's forget about Father," I said.

"How can I? There's nothing he wouldn't do to stop us. He said so himself."

"I'm not here to stop your marriage, Miss Blackwell."

"Then what are you trying to do?"

"Find out what I can about your friend's background."

"So Father can use it against him."

"That's assuming there's something that can be used."

"Isn't that your assumption?"

"No. I made it clear to Colonel Blackwell that I wouldn't go along with a smear attempt, or provide the material for any kind of moral blackmail. I want to make it clear to you."

"And I'm supposed to believe you?"

"Why not? I have nothing against your friend, or against you. If you'd co-operate—"

"Oh, very likely." She looked at me as though I'd made an obscene suggestion. "You're a brash man, aren't you?"

"I'm trying to make the best of a bad job. If you'd co-operate we might be able to get it over with in a hurry. It's not the kind of a job I like."

"You didn't have to take it. I suppose you took it because you needed the money." There was a note of patronage in her voice, the moral superiority of the rich who never have to do anything for money. "How much money is Father paying you?"

"A hundred a day."

"I'll give you five hundred, five days' pay, if you'll simply go away and forget about us."

She took out her red wallet and brandished it.

"I couldn't do that, Miss Blackwell. Besides, it wouldn't do you any good. He'd go and hire himself another detective. And if you think I'm trouble, you should take a look at some of my colleagues."

She leaned on the white guard rail and studied me in silence. Behind her the summer tide had begun to turn. The rising surge slid up the beach, and sanderlings skimmed along its wavering edges. She said to an invisible confidant located somewhere between me and the birds: "Can the man be honest?"

"I can and am. I can, therefore I am."

No smile. She never smiled. "I still don't know what I'm going to do about you. You realize this situation is impossible."

"It doesn't have to be. Don't you have any interest in your fiancé's background?"

"I know all I need to know."

"And what is that?"

"He's a sweet man, and a brilliant one, and he's had a very rough time. Now that he's painting again, there's no limit to what he can accomplish. I want to help him develop his potential."

"Where did he study painting?"

"I've never asked him."

"How long have you known him?"

"Long enough."

"How long?"

"Three or four weeks."

"And that's long enough to make up your mind to marry him?"

"I have a right to marry whom I please. I'm not a child, and neither is Burke."

"I realize *he* isn't."

"I'm twenty-four," she said defensively. "I'm going to be twenty-five in December."

"At which time you come into money."

"Father's briefed you very thoroughly, hasn't he? But there are probably a few things he left out. Burke doesn't care about money, he despises it. We're going to Europe or South America and live very simply, and he will do his work and I will help him and that will be our life." There were stars in her eyes, dim and a long way off. "If I thought the money would prevent me from marrying the man I love, I'd *give* it away."

"Would Burke like that?"

"He'd love it."

"Have you discussed it with him?"

"We've discussed everything. We're very frank with each other."

"Then you can tell me where he comes from and so on."

There was another silence. She moved restlessly against the guard rail as though I had backed her into a corner. The chancy stars in her eyes had dimmed out. In spite of her protestations, she was a worried girl. I guessed that she was mainlining on euphoria, which can be as destructive as any drug.

"Burke doesn't like to talk about the past. It makes him unhappy."

"Because he's an orphan?"

"That's part of it, I think."

"He must be thirty. A man stops being an orphan at twenty-one. What's he been doing since he gave up being a full-time orphan?"

"All he's ever done is paint."

"In Mexico?"

"Part of the time."

"How long had he been in Mexico when you met him?"

"I don't know. A long time."

"Why did he go to Mexico?"

"To paint."

We were going around in circles, concentric circles which contained nothing but a blank. I said: "We've been talking for some time now, and you haven't told me anything that would help to check your friend out."

"What do you expect? I haven't pried into his affairs. I'm not a detective."

"I'm supposed to be," I said ruefully, "but you're making me look like a slob."

"That could be because you are a slob. You could always give up and go away. Go back to Father and tell him you're a failure."

Her needle failed to strike a central nerve, but I reacted to it. "Look here, Miss Blackwell. I sympathize with your natural desire to break away from your family ties and make a life of your own. But you don't want to jump blindly in the opposite direction—"

"You sound exactly like Father. I'm sick of people breathing in my face, telling me what to do and what not to do. You can go back and tell him that."

She was getting terribly restless. I knew I couldn't hold her very much longer. Her body mimed impatience in its awkward gangling attitude, half sitting on the rail, with one foot kicking out spasmodically. It was a fine big body, I thought, not meant for spinsterhood. I had serious doubts that Harriet and her fine big body and her fine big wad of money were meant for Burke Damis, either. The little love scene I'd witnessed between them had been completely one-sided.

Her face had darkened. She turned it away from me. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I'm trying to understand you."

"Don't bother. There's nothing to understand. I'm a very simple person."

"I was thinking that, too."

"You make it sound like an insult."

"No. I doubt that your friend Burke is quite so simple. That isn't an insult, either."

"What is it?"

"Call it a warning. If you were my daughter, and you're young enough to be, I'd hate to see you fling yourself into this thing in a frantic hurry—merely because your father is against it."

"That isn't my reason. It's a positive thing."

"Whatever your reasons are, you could find yourself in water over your head."

She looked out past the kelp beds where the ocean went dark and deep and the sharks lived out of sight.

"'Hang your clothes on a hickory limb,'" she quoted, "'but don't go near the water.' I've heard that before."

"You could even keep your clothes on."

She gave me another of her looks, her black Blackwell looks. "How dare you speak to me in that way?"

"The words came out. I let them."

"You're an insufferable man."

"While I'm being insufferable, you may be able to clear up a small

discrepancy for me. I noticed that the shaving kit in the bathroom has the initials B.C. on it. Those initials don't go with the name Burke Damis."

"I never noticed it."

"Don't you find it interesting?"

"No." But the blood had drained out of her face and left it sallow. "I imagine it belonged to some previous guest. A lot of different people have used the beach house."

"Name one with the initials B.C."

"Bill Campbell," she said quickly.

"Bill Campbell's initials would be W.C. Who is Bill Campbell, by the way?"

"A friend of Father's. I don't know if he ever used the beach house or not."

"Or if he ever existed?"

I'd pressed too hard, and lost her. She dismounted from the rail, smoothing down her skirt, and started away from me toward the beach house. I watched her go. No doubt she was a simple person, as she said, but I couldn't fathom her.

chapter 5

I DROVE BACK up to the highway. Diagonally across the intersection, a large fading sign painted on the side of a roadside diner advertised Jumbo Shrimp. I could smell grease before I got out of the car.

The stout woman behind the counter looked as though she had spent her life waiting, but not for me. I sat in a booth by the front window, partly obscured by an unlit neon beer sign. She brought me a knife and fork, a glass of water, and a paper napkin. I was the only customer in the place.

"You want the shrimp special?"

"I'll just have coffee, thanks."

"That will cost you twenty cents," she said severely, "without the food to go with it."

She picked up the knife and fork and the paper napkin. I sat and nursed the coffee, keeping an eye on the blacktop road that led up from the beach.

The overcast was burning off. A sun like a small watery moon appeared behind it. The muffled horizon gradually cleared, and the sea changed from grey to greyish blue. The surf had begun to thump so hard I could hear it.

Two or three cars had come up from the cluster of beach houses, but there had been no sign of Harriet's green Buick. I started in on my second cup of coffee. Refills were only ten cents.

A zebra-striped hearse with a broken headlight came in off the highway. It disgorged, from front and rear, four boys and two girls who all looked like siblings. Their hair, bleached by sun and peroxide, was long on the boys and short on the girls so that it was almost uniform. They wore blue sweatshirts over bathing suits. Their faces were brown and closed.

They came in and sat in a row at the counter, ordered six beers, drank them with hero sandwiches which the girls made out of French loaves and other provisions brought in in paper bags. They ate quietly and voraciously. From time to time, between bites, the largest boy, who carried himself like their leader, made a remark about big surf. He might have been talking about a tribal deity.

They rose in unison like a platoon, and marched out to their hearse. Two of the boys got into the front seat. The rest of them sat in the back beside the surfboards. One of the girls, the pretty one, made a face at me through the side window. For no good reason, I made a face back at her. The hearse turned down the blacktop toward the beach.

"Beach bums," the woman behind the counter said.

She wasn't talking to me. Having nursed two coffees for an hour, I may have been included in her epithet. The coffee, or the waiting, was beginning to make me nervous. I ordered a therapeutic beer and turned back to the window.

The woman went on talking to herself. "You'd think they'd have more respect, painting a hearse in stripes like that. They got no respect for the living or the dead. How they expect me to make a living, bringing in their own food? *I* don't know what the world is coming to."

Harriet's car appeared, coming out of a tight curve, halfway up the slope. I saw when it reached the highway that she was driving and that her friend was in the seat beside her. He was wearing his grey suit, with a shirt and tie, and he bore a curious resemblance to those blank-faced dummies you see in the windows of men's clothing stores. They turned south, toward Los Angeles.

I followed them down the highway. Malibu slowed them, and I was close on their tail as they passed through the shabby fringes of Pacific Palisades. They made a left turn onto Sunset. The light had changed when I reached the corner. By the time it changed in my favor, the Buick was far out of sight. I tried to make up the minutes I had lost, but the squealing curves of the Boulevard kept my speed down.

I remembered that the Blackwells lived in the hills off Sunset. On the chance that Harriet was on her way home, I turned in through the baronial gates of Bel Air. But I couldn't find the Blackwell house, and had to go back to the hotel to ask directions.

It was visible from the door of the hotel bar. The white-coated barman pointed it out to me: a graceful Spanish mansion which stood at the top of the terraced slope. I gave the barman a dollar of Blackwell's money and asked him if he knew the Colonel.

"I wouldn't say I *know* him. He isn't one of your talkative drinkers."

"What kind of a drinker is he?"

"The silent type. My favorite type."

I went back to my car and up the winding road to the hilltop house. The rose garden in front of it was contained like a conflagration by a clipped boxwood hedge. Harriet's Buick was standing in the semicircular gravel drive.

I could see her father's white head over the roof of the car. His voice carried all the way out to the road. I caught isolated words like sneak and scrounger.

When I got nearer I could see that Blackwell was carrying a double-barreled shotgun at the hip. Burke Damis got out of the car and spoke to him. I didn't hear what he said, but the muzzle of the shotgun came up to the level of his chest. Damis reached for it.

The older man fell back a step. The level gun rested firmly at his shoulder. Damis took a step forward, thrusting out his chest as if he welcomed the threat of the gun.

"Go ahead and shoot me. It would fix you at least."

"I warn you, you can press me so far and no farther."

Damis laughed. "You ain't seen nothing yet, old man."

These things were being said as I climbed out of my car and walked toward them, slowly. I was afraid of jarring the precarious balance of the scene. It was very still on the hilltop. I could hear the sound of their breathing and other things besides: my feet crunching in the gravel, the low call of a mourning dove from the television antenna on the roof.

Neither Blackwell nor Damis looked at me as I came up beside them. They weren't in physical contact, but their faces were contorted as though their hands had death grips on each other. The double muzzle of the shotgun dominated the scene like a pair of empty insane eyes.

"There's a dove on the roof," I said conversationally. "If you feel like shooting something, Colonel, why don't you take a shot at it? Or is there a law against it in these parts? I seem to remember something about a law."

He turned to me with a grimace of rage stamped in the muscles of his face. The gun swung with his movement. I took hold of the double barrel and forced it up toward the unoffending sky. I lifted it out of Blackwell's hands, and broke open the breach. There was a shell in each chamber. I tore a fingernail unloading them.

"Give me back my shotgun," he said.

I gave it to him empty. "Shooting never solved a thing. Didn't you learn that in the war?"

"The fellow insulted me."

"The way I heard it, insults were traveling in both directions."

"But you didn't hear what he said. He made a filthy accusation."

"So you want big black filthy headlines, and a nice long filthy trial in Superior Court."

"The filthier the better," Damis said.

I turned on him. "Shut up."

His eyes were somber and steady. "You can't shut me up. Neither can he."

"He almost did, boy. Twelve-gauge shotgun wounds at this range ruin you for keeps."

"Tell *him.* I couldn't care less."

Damis looked as though he didn't care, for himself or anyone. But he seemed to feel exposed under my eyes. He got into the passenger's seat of Harriet's car and pulled the door shut. The action, all his actions, had something bold about them and something secretive.

Blackwell turned toward the house and I went along. The veranda was brilliant with fuchsias growing out of hanging redwood tubs. To my slightly jittered vision, they resembled overflowing buckets of blood.

"You came near committing murder, Colonel. You should keep your guns unloaded and locked up."

"I do."

"Maybe you ought to throw the key away."

He looked down at the gun in his hands as if he didn't remember how it had got there. Sudden pockets had formed under his eyes.

"What led up to this?" I said.

"You know the long-term part of it. He's been moving in on me and my household, robbing me of my most precious possession—"

"A daughter isn't exactly a possession."

"I have to look out for her. Someone has to. She announced a few minutes ago that she was going away to marry the fellow. I tried to reason with her. She accused me of being a little Hitler who had hired a private Gestapo. That accusation hurt, from my own daughter, but the fellow"—he shot an angry glance toward the car—"the fellow made a worse one."

"What did he say?"

"I wouldn't repeat it, to anyone. He made a filthy allegation about me. Of course there's nothing to it. I've always been upright in my dealings with others, especially my own daughter."

"I don't doubt that. I'm trying to find out what kind of thinking goes on in Damis's head."

"He's a mixed-up young man," Blackwell said. "I believe he's dangerous."

That made two of them, in my opinion.

A screen door slammed, and Harriet appeared behind the hanging red and purple fuchsias. She had changed to a light sharkskin suit and a

hat with a little grey veil fluttering from it. The little veil bothered me, perhaps because it short-circuited the distance between brides and widows. She was carrying a blue hatbox and a heavy blue case.

Her father met her on the steps and reached for the blue case. "Let me help with that, dear."

She swung it away from him. "I can handle it myself, thank you."

"Is that all you have to say to me?"

"Everything's been said. We know what you think of us. Burke and I are going away where you won't be tempted to—harass us." Her cold young eyes rested on me, and then on the shotgun in her father's hand. "I don't even feel physically safe."

"The gun's empty," I said. "Nobody got hurt and nobody's going to. I wish you'd reconsider this move, Miss Blackwell. Give it a day's thought, anyway."

She wouldn't speak directly to me. "Call off your dogs," she said to Blackwell. "Burke and I are going to be married and you have no right to stop us. There must be legal limits to what even a *father* can do."

"But won't you listen to me, dear? I have no desire to do anything—"

"Stop doing it then."

I'd been surprised by his quiet reasonableness. He didn't have the self-control to sustain it. The sudden yelling demon took possession of him again. "You've made your choice, I wash my hands of you. Go off with your filthy little miracle man and roll in the mire with him. I won't lift a finger to rescue you."

She said from the height of her pale cold anger: "You're talking foolishly, Father. What is the matter with you?"

She strode on to the car, swinging her bags like clumsy weapons. Damis took them from her and put them in the trunk, beside his own suitcase.

Isobel Blackwell had come out of the house and down the veranda steps. As she passed between me and her husband, she pressed his shoulder in sympathy and perhaps in admonition. She went up to Harriet.

"I wish you wouldn't do this to your father."

"I'm not doing anything *to* him."

"He feels it that way. He loves you, you know."

"I don't love him."

"I'm sure you'll regret saying that, Harriet. When you do, please let him know."

"Why should I bother? He has you."

Isobel shrugged, as though the possession of herself was no great boon to anyone. "You're more important to him than I am. You could break his heart."

"He's going to have to get over it then. I'm sorry if you feel badly." In a quick uprush of feeling, Harriet embraced the older woman. "You've been the best to me—better than I deserve."

Isobel patted her back, looking past her at Damis. He had been watching the two of them like a spectator at a game on which he had placed a moderate bet.

"I hope you'll take good care of her, Mr. Damis."

"I can try."

"Where are you taking her?"

"Away from here."

"That isn't very informative."

"It wasn't intended to be. This is a big country, also a free one. Let's go, Harriet."

She disengaged herself from her stepmother and got into the driver's seat of her car. Damis climbed in beside her. I made a note of the license number as they drove away. Neither of them looked back.

Blackwell approached us, walking rather uncertainly in the gravel. His body seemed to have shrunk some more in his clothes, while his large face had grown larger.

"You let them go," he said accusingly.

"I had nothing to stop them with. I can't use force."

"You should have followed them."

"What for? You said you'd washed your hands of them."

His wife spoke up: "Perhaps it would be better if you did that, Mark. You can't go on in this fashion, letting the situation drive you crazy. You might as well accept it."

"I refuse to accept it, and it's not driving me crazy. I've never been saner in my life. I resent the implication that I'm not."

The ranting rhythm was taking over his voice again. She laid her gentle admonishing hand on his arm.

"Come into the house. You need to relax, after all you've been through."

"Leave me alone." He flung her hand off and said to me: "I want Damis put in jail, do you hear me?"

"To do that, you'd have to prove that he's committed a jailable offense."

"What about taking a girl across a state line for immoral purposes?"

"Has he done that?"

"He transported my daughter from Mexico—"

"But marriage isn't considered an immoral purpose under the law."

Isobel Blackwell tittered unexpectedly.

He turned on her. "You think it's funny, do you?"

"Not particularly. But it's better to laugh than to weep. And better to marry than to burn. I'm quoting your own words to me, remember?"

Her tone was serious, but there was irony in it. Blackwell stalked toward the house, picking up his shotgun on the way. He slammed the front door so violently that the dove flew up with whistling wings from the television antenna. Isobel Blackwell spread her arms as though a larger bird had escaped from them.

"What am I going to do with him?"

"Give him a tranquilizer."

"Mark has been *eating* tranquilizers all week. It doesn't seem to help his nerves. If he goes on at this rate, I'm afraid he'll shake himself to pieces."

"It's other people I'm worried about."

"You mean the young man—Damis?"

"I mean anyone who crosses him."

She touched me lightly on the arm. "You don't think he's capable of doing actual harm to anyone?"

"You know him better than I do."

"I thought I knew Mark very well indeed. But he's changed in the last year. He's always been a gentle man. I never thought he belonged in the military profession. The Army came to agree with me, as it happened. They retired him after the war, very much against his will. His first wife, Pauline, divorced him about the same time."

"Why, if you don't mind my asking?"

"You'd have to ask her. She went to Nevada one day and got a divorce and married another man—a retired dentist named Keith Hatchen. They've lived in Mexico ever since. I suppose Pauline and her dentist have a right to whatever happiness they can muster. But it left poor Mark with nothing to fill his life but his guns and his sports and the Blackwell family history which he has been trying to write for lo these many years."

"And Harriet," I said.

"And Harriet."

"I'm beginning to get the picture. You say he's changed in the past year. Has anything special happened, besides Harriet's taking up with Damis?"

"Mark took up with me last fall," she said with a one-sided smile.

"You don't strike me as a malign influence."

"Thank you. I'm not."

"I had the impression that you'd been married longer than that." It was partly a question and partly an expression of sympathy.

"Did you now? Of course I've been married before. And I've known Mark and Harriet for a great many years, practically since she was a babe

in arms. You see, my late husband was very close to Mark. Ronald was related to the Blackwells."

"Then you probably know a lot of things you haven't told me," I said.

"Every woman does. Isn't that your experience, Mr. Archer?"

I liked her dry wit, even if it was cutting me off from further information. I made a gesture that took in the big house and the roses and the gap in the boxwood hedge where Harriet's car had last been seen.

"Do you think I should go on with this?"

She answered deliberately: "Perhaps you had better. Mark certainly needs another man to guide his hand and advise him—not that he's terribly good at taking advice. I liked the way you handled this crisis just now. It could have erupted into something terrible."

"I wish your husband realized that."

"He does. I'm sure he does, though he won't admit it." Her dark eyes were full of feeling. "You've done us all a good turn, Mr. Archer, and you'll do us another by staying with us in this. Find out what you can about Damis. If you can give him a clean bill of health, morally speaking, it should do a lot to reconcile Mark to the marriage."

"You're not suggesting a whitewash job on Damis?"

"Of course not. I'm interested in the truth, whatever it may turn out to be. We all are. Now if you'll excuse me I think I'd better go in and look after my husband. Holding his hand seems to be my function in life these days."

She wasn't complaining, exactly, but I detected a note of resignation. As she turned away, very slim in her linen sheath, I caught myself trying to estimate her age. If she had known the Blackwells since Harriet was a baby, and had come to know them through her first husband, she must have married him more than twenty years ago. Which suggested that she was over forty.

Well, so was I.

chapter 6

I USED BLACKWELL'S KEY to let myself into the beach house. Nothing had changed in the big upstairs room, except that there were black paper ashes in the fireplace. They crumbled when I tried to pick them up on the fire shovel. The painting hung on its easel, still gleaming wet in places. In the light that slanted through the glass doors, the spot of cobalt blue which Damis had added last glared at me like an eye.

I backed away from the picture, trying to understand it, and went down the stairs to the master bedroom. The louvered doors of the closet were swinging open. It had been cleared out. There was nothing in the chest of drawers, nothing in the bathroom but some clean towels. The back bedroom was empty.

I moved back into the front bedroom and went through it carefully. The wastebasket had been emptied, which probably accounted for the burned paper in the upstairs fireplace. Damis had gone to a lot of trouble to cover his traces.

But he had overlooked one piece of paper. It was jammed between the sliding glass door and its frame, evidently to keep the door from rattling. It was thick and yellowish paper, folded small. When I unfolded it, I recognized it as one of those envelopes that airlines give their passengers to keep their tickets in.

This was a Mexicana Airlines envelope, with flight instructions typed inside the flap. Mr. Q. R. Simpson, the instructions said, was to leave the Guadalajara airport at 8:40 A.M. on July 10 and arrive at Los Angeles International at 1:30 P.M. the same day.

I messed around in the bedroom some more, discovered only some dust mice under the bed, and went upstairs. The painting drew me back

to it. It affected me differently each time. This time I saw, or thought I saw, that it was powerful and ugly —an assault of dark forces on the vision. Perhaps I was reading my fantasy into it, but it seemed to me that its darkness was the ultimate darkness of death.

I had an impulse to take it along and find an expert to show it to. If Damis was a known artist, his style should be recognizable. But I couldn't move the thing. The oils were still wet and would smear.

I went out to the car to get my camera. The zebra-striped hearse was standing empty beside it. The sky had cleared, and a few sun-bathers were lying around in the sand like bodies after a catastrophe. Beyond the surf line the six surfers waited in prayerful attitudes on their boards.

A big wave rose toward them. Five of the surfers rode it in, like statues on a traveling blue hillside. The sixth was less skillful. The wave collapsed on her. She lost her board and swam in after it.

Instead of taking it out to sea again, she carried it up the beach on her head. She left it on the sand above the tide line and climbed the rocky bank to the parking space. She had the bust and shoulders of a young Amazon, but she was shivering and close to tears.

It was the girl who had made the face at me, which gave us something in common. I said: "You took quite a spill."

She looked at me as if she had never seen me before, almost as if she wasn't seeing me now. I was a member of another tribe or species. Her eyes were wet and wild, like the eyes of sea lions.

She got a man's topcoat out of the back of the hearse and put it on. It was good brown tweed which looked expensive, but there were wavy white salt marks on it, as if it had been immersed in the sea. Her fingers trembled on the brown leather buttons. One of the buttons, the top one, was missing. She turned up the collar around the back of her head where the wet hair clung like a golden helmet.

"If you're cold I have a heater in my car."

"Blah," she said, and turned her tweed back on me.

I loaded the camera with color film and took some careful shots of Damis's painting. On my way to the airport I dropped the film off with a photographer friend in Santa Monica. He promised to get it developed in a hurry.

The very polite young man at the Mexicana desk did a few minutes' research and came up with the information that Q. R. Simpson had indeed been on the July 10 flight from Guadalajara. So had Harriet Blackwell. Burke Damis hadn't.

My tentative conclusion, which I kept to myself, was that Damis had entered the United States under the name of Simpson. Since he couldn't leave Mexico without a nontransferable tourist card or enter this country

without proof of citizenship, the chances were that Q. R. Simpson was Damis's real name.

The polite young Mexican told me further that the crew of the July 10 flight had flown in from Mexico again early this afternoon. The pilot and copilot were in the office now, but they wouldn't know anything about the passengers. The steward and stewardess, who would, had already gone for the day. They were due to fly out again tomorrow morning. If I came out to the airport before flight time, perhaps they would have a few minutes to talk to me about my friend Señor Simpson.

Exhilarated by his Latin courtesy, I walked back to the Immigration and Customs shed. The officers on duty took turns looking at my license as if it was something I'd found in a box of breakfast cereal.

Feeling the need to check in with some friendly authority, I drove downtown. Peter Colton was in his cubicle in the District Attorney's office, behind a door that said Chief Criminal Investigator.

Peter had grown old in law enforcement. The grooves of discipline and thought were like saber scars in his cheeks. His triangular eyes glinted at me over half-glasses which had slid down his large aggressive nose.

He finished reading a multigraphed sheet, initialed it, and sealed it into his out-basket.

"Sit down, Lew. How's it going?"

"All right. I dropped by to thank you for recommending me to Colonel Blackwell."

He regarded me quizzically. "You don't sound very grateful. Is Blackie giving you a bad time?"

"Something is. He handed me a peculiar case. I don't know whether it's a case or not. It may be only Blackwell's imagination."

"He never struck me as the imaginative type."

"Known him long?"

"I served under him, for my sins, in Bavaria just after the war. He was in Military Government, and I was in charge of a plain-clothes section of Military Police."

"What was he like to work for?"

"Tough," Colton said, and added reflectively: "Blackie liked command, too much. He didn't get enough of it during the fighting. Some friend in Washington, or some enemy, kept him in the rear echelons. I don't know whether it was for Blackie's own protection or the protection of the troops. He was bitter about it, and it made him hard on his men. But he's a bit of an ass, and we didn't take him too seriously."

"In what way was he hard on his men?"

"All the ways he could think of. He went in for enforcement of petty

rules. He was very keen on the anti-fraternization policy. My men had murder and rape and black-marketeering to contend with. But Blackie expected us to spend our nights patrolling the cabarets suppressing fraternization. It drove him crazy to think of all the fraternization that was going on between innocent American youths and man-eating *Fräuleins*."

"Is he some kind of a sex nut?"

"I wouldn't put it that strongly." But Colton's grin was wolfish. "He's a Puritan, from a long line of Puritans. What made it worse, he was having fraternization problems in his own family. His wife was interested in various other men. I heard later she divorced him."

"What sort of a woman is she?"

"Quite a dish, in those days, but I never knew her up close. Does it matter?"

"It could. Her daugher Harriet went to Mexico to visit her a few weeks ago and made a bad connection. At least it doesn't look too promising. He's a painter named Burke Damis, or possibly Q. R. Simpson. She brought him back here with her, intends to marry him. Blackwell thinks the man is trying to take her for her money. He hired me to investigate that angle, or anything else that I can find on Damis."

"Or possibly Q. R. Simpson, you said. Is Damis using an alias?"

"I haven't confirmed it. I'm fairly sure he entered the country a week ago under the Q. R. Simpson name. It may be his real name, since it isn't a likely alias."

"And you want me to check it out."

"That would be nice."

Colton picked up his ball-point pen and jabbed with it in my direction. "You know I can't spend public time and money on a private deal like this."

"Even for an old friend?"

"Blackwell's no friend of mine. I recommended you to get him out of my hair in one quick easy motion."

"I was referring to myself," I said, "no doubt presumptuously. A simple query to the State Bureau of Criminal Investigation wouldn't take much time, and it might save trouble in the long run. You always say you're more interested in preventing crime than punishing it."

"What crime do you have in mind?"

"Murder for profit is a possibility. I don't say it's probable. I'm mainly concerned with saving a naïve young woman from a lot of potential grief."

"And saving yourself a lot of potential legwork."

"I'm doing my own legwork as usual. But I could knock on every door from here to San Luis Obispo and it wouldn't tell me what I need to know."

"What, exactly, is that?"

"Whether Q. R. Simpson, or Burke Damis, has a record."

Colton wrote the names on a memo pad. I'd succeeded in arousing his curiosity.

"I suppose I could check with Sacramento." He glanced at the clock on the wall. It was nearly four. "If the circuits aren't too loaded, we might get an answer before we close up for the night. You want to wait outside?"

I read a law-enforcement trade journal in the anteroom, all the way through to the advertisements. Police recruits were being offered as much as four hundred and fifty dollars a month in certain localities.

Peter Colton opened his door at five o'clock on the nose and beckoned me into his office. A teletype flimsy rustled in his hand.

"Nothing on Burke Damis," he said. "Quincy Ralph Simpson is another story: he's on the Missing Persons list, has been for a couple of weeks. According to his wife, he's been gone much longer than that."

"His wife?"

"She's the one who reported him missing. She lives up north, in San Mateo County."

chapter 7

IT WAS CLEAR late twilight when the jet dropped down over the Peninsula. The lights of its cities were scattered like a broken necklace along the dark rim of the Bay. At its tip stood San Francisco, remote and brilliant as a city of the mind, hawsered to reality by her two great bridges — if Marin and Berkeley were reality.

I took a cab to Redwood City. The deputy on duty on the ground floor of the Hall of Justice was a young man with red chipmunk cheeks and eyes that were neither bright nor stupid. He looked me over noncommittally, waiting to see if I was a citizen or one of the others.

I showed him my license and told him I was interested in a man named Quincy Ralph Simpson. "The Los Angeles D.A.'s office says you reported him missing about two weeks ago."

He said after a ruminative pause: "Have you spotted him?"

"I may have."

"Where?"

"In the Los Angeles area. Do you have a picture of Simpson?"

"I'll see." He went into the back of the office, rummaged through a drawerful of bulletins and circulars, and came back empty-handed. "I can't find any, sorry. But I can tell you what he looks like. Medium height, about five-nine or -ten; medium build, one-sixty-five or so; black hair; I don't know the color of his eyes; no visible scars or other distinguishing marks."

"Age?"

"About my age. I'm twenty-nine. Is he your man?"

"It's possible." Just barely possible. "Is Simpson wanted for anything?"

"Non-support, maybe, but I don't know of any complaint. What makes you think he's wanted?"

"The fact that you can describe him."

"I know him. That is, I've seen him around here."

"Doing what?"

He leaned on the counter with a kind of confidential hostility. "I'm not supposed to talk about what I see around here, friend. You want to know anything about that, you'll have to take it up with the boys upstairs."

"Is Captain Royal upstairs?"

"The Captain's off duty. I wouldn't want to disturb him at home. You know him well?"

"We worked together on a case."

"What case was that?"

"I'm not supposed to talk about it, friend. Can you give me Mrs. Simpson's address?"

He reached under the counter and produced a phone book which he pushed in my direction. Q. R. Simpson was listed, at 2160 Marvista Drive. My taxi driver told me that this was in a tract on the far side of Skyline, toward Luna Bay: a five-dollar run.

We drove through darkening hills and eventually turned off the road past a tattered billboard which announced: "No Down Payment. No Closing Costs." The tract houses were new and small and all alike and already declining into slums. Zigzagging through the grid of streets like motorized rats in a maze, we found the address we were looking for.

It stood between two empty houses, and had a rather abandoned air itself. The tiny plot of grass in front of it looked brown and withered in the headlights. A 1952 Ford convertible with the back window torn out was parked in the carport.

I asked the driver to wait, and rang the doorbell. A young woman answered. The door was warped, and she had some trouble opening it all the way.

She was a striking brunette, very thin and tense, with a red slash of mouth and hungry dark eyes. She had on a short black tight dress which revealed her slender knees and only half concealed her various other attractions.

She was aware of these. "This isn't free show night. What is it you want?"

"If you're Mrs. Simpson, I'd like to talk about your husband."

"Go ahead and talk about him. I'm listening." She cocked her head in an angry parody of interest.

"You reported him missing."

"Yes, I reported him missing. I haven't set eyes on him for two whole months. And that suits me just fine. Who needs him?" Her voice was

rough with grief and resentment. She was looking past me across the scraggy untended lawn. "Who's that in the taxi?"

"Just the driver. I asked him to wait for me."

"I thought it might be Ralph," she said in a different tone, "afraid to come in the house and all."

"It isn't Ralph. You say he's been gone a couple of months, but you only reported him missing two weeks ago."

"I gave him all the leeway I could. He's taken off before, but never for this long. Mr. Haley at the motel said I ought to clue in the cops. I had to go back to work at the motel. Even with that I can't keep up the house payments without some help from Ralph. But a lot of good it did telling the cops. They don't do much unless you can prove foul play or something." She wrinkled her expressive upper lip. "Are you one?"

"I'm a private detective." I told her my name. "I ran into a man today who could be your missing husband. May I come in?"

"I guess so."

She moved sideways into her living room, glancing around as if to see it through a visitor's eyes. It was tiny and clean and poor, furnished with the kind of cheap plastic pieces that you're still paying installments on when they disintegrate. She turned up the three-way lamp and invited me to sit at one end of the chesterfield. She sat at the other end, hunched forward, her sharp elbows resting on her knees.

"So where did you see him?"

"Malibu."

I wasn't paying much attention to what I said. There was a framed oil painting on the wall above the television set. Though it was recognizable as a portrait of Mrs. Simpson, it looked amateurish to me. I went over and examined it more closely.

"That's supposed to be me," she said behind me.

"It's not a bad likeness. Did your husband do it?"

"Yeah. It's a hobby he has. He wanted to take it up seriously at one time but a man he knew, a real painter, told him he wasn't good enough. That's the story of his life, hopeful beginnings and nothing endings. So now he's living the life of Riley in Malibu while I stay here and work my fingers to the bone. What's he doing, beachcombing?"

I didn't answer her question right away. A dog-eared paperback entitled *The Art of Detection* lay on top of the television set. It was the only book I could see in the room. I picked it up and riffled through the pages. Many of them were heavily underlined; some of them were illustrated with bad cartoons penciled in the margins.

"That was another one of Ralph's big deals," she said. "He was going to be a great detective and put us on easy street. Naturally he didn't get to

first base. He never got to first base with any of his big wheels and deals. A man he knows on the cops told him with his record—" She covered her mouth with her hand.

I laid the book down. "Ralph has a record?"

"Not really. That was just a manner of speaking." Her eyes had hardened defensively. "You didn't tell me what he was doing in Malibu."

"I'm not even certain it was your husband I saw there."

"What did he look like?"

I described Burke Damis, and thought I caught the light of recognition in her eyes. But she said definitely: "It isn't him."

"I'd like to be sure about that. Do you have a photograph of Ralph?"

"No. He never had his picture taken."

"Not even a wedding picture?"

"We had one taken, but Ralph never got around to picking up the copies. We were married in Reno, see, and he couldn't hold on to the twenty dollars long enough. He can't keep away from the tables when he's in Reno."

"Does he spend much time in Reno?"

"All the time he can get away from work. I used to go along with him, I used to think it was fun. I had another think coming. It's the reason we never been able to save a nickel."

I moved across the room and sat beside her. "What does Ralph do for a living, Mrs. Simpson?"

"Anything he can get. He never finished high school, and that makes it tough. He's a pretty good short-order cook, but he hated the hours. Same with bartending, which he did for a while. He's had some good-paying houseboy jobs around the Peninsula. But he's too proud for that kind of work. He hates to take orders from people. Maybe," she added bitterly, "he's too proud for any kind of work, and that's why he ran out on me."

"How long ago did he leave?"

"Two months ago, I told you that. He left here on the night of May eighteen. He just got back from Nevada that same day, and he took right off for Los Angeles. I think he only came home to try and talk me out of the car. But I told him he wasn't going to leave me marooned without a car. So he finally broke down and took a bus. I drove him down to the bus station."

"What was he planning to do in Los Angeles?"

"I don't know. He told me this story, when he was trying to talk me out of the car, but I didn't believe it. He said he was doing undercover work. I heard the same story from him before, when he was working in a drive-in on Camino Real. He claimed the cops were paying him to give them tips."

"Tips about what?"

"Kids smoking reefers, stuff like that. I didn't know whether to believe him or not. I thought maybe he was just talking to make himself feel important. He always wanted to be a cop himself."

"But his record wouldn't let him."

"He has no record."

"You said he had."

"You must have been hearing things. Anyway, I'm getting tired. I've had enough of this."

She rose in a sudden thrust of energy and stood by the door, inviting me to leave. I stayed where I was on the plastic chesterfield.

"You might as well leave," she said. "It isn't Ralph you saw in Malibu."

"I'm not so sure of that."

"You can take my word."

"All right, I take your word." It doesn't pay to argue with a source of information. "But I'm still interested in Ralph. Aren't you?"

"Naturally I am. I'm married to him. At least I'm supposed to be married to him. But I got a funny feeling, here." Her left hand moved up her body to her breast. "I got a feeling he traded me in on a new model, and *that's* the undercover work."

"Do you know who the other woman might be?"

"No. I just got a feeling. Why would a man go away and not come back?"

I could think of various answers to that, but I didn't see much point in spelling them out. "When Ralph took the bus south, did he say anything about going to Mexico?"

"Not to me he didn't."

"Has he ever been there?"

"I don't think so. He would of told me if he had."

"Did he ever talk about leaving the country?"

"Not lately. He used to talk about going back to Japan someday. He spent some time there in the Korean War. Wait a minute, though. He took his birth certificate with him, I think. That could mean he was planning to leave the States, couldn't it?"

"It could. He took his birth certificate to Los Angeles?"

"I guess he did, but it was a couple of weeks before that he had me looking for it. It took me hours to find it. He wanted to take it along to Nevada with him. He said he needed it to apply for a job."

"What kind of a job?"

"He didn't say. He was probably stringing me, anyway." She moved restlessly and stood over me. "You think he left the country?"

Before I could answer her, a telephone rang in another part of the

house. She stiffened, and walked quickly out of the room. I heard her voice: "This is Vicky Simpson speaking."

There was a long pause.

"I don't believe it," she said.

Another pause.

"It can't be him," she said. "He can't be dead."

I followed the fading sound of her voice into the kitchen. She was leaning on the yellow formica breakfast bar, holding the receiver away from her head as if it was a dangerous yellow bird. The pupils of her eyes had expanded and made her look blind.

"Who is it, Mrs. Simpson?"

Her lips moved, groping for words. "A caw—a policeman down south. He says Ralph is dead. He can't be."

"Let me talk to the man."

She handed me the receiver. I said into the mouthpiece: "This is Lew Archer. I'm a licensed private detective working in co-operation with the Los Angeles District Attorney's office."

"We had a query from them this evening." The man's voice was slow and uncertain. "We had this body on our hands, unidentified. Their chief investigator called—fellow named Colton, maybe you know him."

"I know him. Who am I talking to?"

"Leonard, Sergeant Wesley Leonard. I do the identification work for the sheriff's department here in Citrus County. We use the L.A. facilities all the time, and we had already asked for their help on this body. Mr. Colton wanted to know if maybe it was this certain Ralph Simpson who is missing. We must have mislaid the original missing report," he added apologetically, "or maybe we never got it in the first place."

"It happens all the time."

"Yeah. Anyway, we're trying to get a positive identification. What's the chances of Mrs. Simpson coming down here?"

"Pretty good, I think. Does the body fit the description?"

"It fits all right. Height and weight and coloring and estimated age, all the same."

"How did he die?"

"That's a little hard to say. He got pretty banged up when the bulldozer rooted him out."

"A bulldozer rooted him out?"

"I'll explain. They're putting in this new freeway at the west end of town. Quite a few houses got condemned to the state, they were standing vacant you know, and this poor guy was buried in back of one of them. He wasn't buried very deep. A 'dozer snagged him and brought him up when they razed the houses last week."

"How long dead?"

"A couple of months, the doc thinks. It's been dry, and he's in pretty fair condition. The important thing is who he is. How soon can Mrs. Simpson get down here?"

"Tonight, if I can get her on a plane."

"Swell. Ask for me at the courthouse in Citrus Junction. Sergeant Wesley Leonard."

She said when I hung up: "Oh no you don't, I'm staying here."

She retreated across the kitchen, shocked and stumbling, and stood in a corner beside the refrigerator.

"Ralph may be dead, Vicky."

"I don't believe it. I don't want to see him if he is."

"Somebody has to identify him."

"*You* identify him."

"I don't know him. You do."

Her mascara had started to dissolve. She dashed murky tears from her eyes. "I don't *want* to see him dead. I never saw anybody dead before."

"Dead people won't hurt you. It's the live ones that hurt you."

I touched her goosefleshed arm. She jerked it away from me.

"You'll feel better if you have a drink," I said. "Do you have anything to drink in the house?"

"I don't drink."

I opened a cupboard and found a glass and filled it at the tap. Some of it spilled down her chin. She scrubbed at it angrily with a dish towel.

"I don't want to go. It'll only make me sick."

But after a while she agreed to get ready while I phoned the coastal airlines. There was room for us on a ten-thirty flight to Los Angeles. By midnight we were approaching Citrus Junction in the car I had left at International Airport.

The road was walled on each side by thick orange groves. It emerged into a desolate area rimmed with houses, where highway construction had been under way. Earth movers hulked in the darkness like sleeping saurians.

The road became the main street of the town. It was a back-country town, in spite of its proximity to Los Angeles. Everything was closed for the night, except for a couple of bars. A few men in working clothes wandered along the empty pavements, staggering under the twin burdens of alcohol and loneliness.

"I don't like it here," Vicky said. "It looks like hicksville."

"You won't have to stay long."

"How long? I'm stony until payday."

"The police will probably make arrangements for you. Let's wait and see how it falls."

The metal cupola of the courthouse swelled like a tarnished bubble under the stars. The building's dark interior smelled mustily of human lives, like the inside of an old trunk. I found the duty deputy in an office on the first floor. He told me that Sergeant Leonard was at the mortuary, just around the corner.

It was a three-storied white colonial building with a sign on the lawn in front of it: "Norton's Funeral Parlors." Vicky hung back when we got out of the car. I took her arm and walked her down a hall through the odor of carnations to a lighted doorway at the end of the hall and through it into the odor of formaldehyde.

She dragged on my arm. "I can't go through with it."

"You have to. It may not be Ralph."

"Then what am I doing here?"

"It may be Ralph."

She looked wildly around the room. It was bare except for a grey coffin standing on trestles against the wall.

"Is he in that?"

"No. Get yourself under control, Vicky. It will only take a minute and then it will be over."

"But what am I going to do afterward?"

It was a question I couldn't attempt to answer. A further door opened, and a deputy with sergeant's stripes on his arm came through toward us. He was a middle-aged man with a belly overlapping his gunbelt, and slow friendly eyes that went with his voice on the telephone.

"I'm Leonard."

"Archer. This is Mrs. Simpson."

He bowed with exaggerated courtliness. "I'm pleased to know you, ma'am. It was good of you to make the journey."

"I had to, I guess. Where is he?"

"The doctor's working on him."

"You mean he's still *alive?*"

"He's long dead, ma'am. I'm sorry. Dr. White is working on his internal organs, trying to find out what killed him."

She started to sit down on the floor. I caught her under the arms. Leonard and I helped her into an adjoining room where a night light burned and the smell of carnations was strong. She half lay on an upholstered settee, with her spike heels tucked under her.

"If you don't mind waiting a little, ma'am, Doc White will get him

ready for your inspection." Leonard's voice had taken on unctuous intonations from the surroundings. He hovered over her. "Maybe I could get you a drink. What would you like to drink?"

"Embalming fluid."

He made a shocked noise at the back of his palate.

"Just go away and leave me alone. I'm all right."

I followed Leonard into the autopsy room. The dead man lay on an enameled table. I won't describe him. His time in the earth, and on the table, had altered him for the worse. He bore no great resemblance to Burke Damis, and never had.

Dr. White was closing a butterfly incision in the body. His rubber-gloved hands looked like artificial hands. He was a bald-headed man with hound jowls drooping from under a tobacco-stained mustache. He had a burning cigarette in his mouth, and wagged his head slowly from side to side to keep the smoke out of his eyes. The smoke coiled and drifted in the brilliant overhead light.

I waited until he had finished what he was doing and had drawn a rubberized sheet up to the dead man's chin.

"What did you find out, Doctor?"

"Heart puncture, in the left ventricle. Looks like an icepick wound." He stripped off his rubber gloves and moved to the sink, saying above the noise of running water: "Those contusions on the head were inflicted after death, in my opinion—a long time after death."

"By the bulldozer?"

"I assume so."

"Just when was he dug up?"

"Friday, wasn't it, Wesley?"

The Sergeant nodded. "Friday afternoon."

"Did you make a preliminary examination then?"

Dr. White turned from the sink, drying his hands and arms. "None was ordered. The D.A. and the Sheriff, who's also Coroner, are both in Sacramento at a convention."

"Besides," Leonard put in, eager to save face, "the icepick wound didn't show from the outside hardly at all. It was just a little nick under the left breast."

It wasn't for me to tell them their business. I wanted co-operation. "Did you find the icepick?"

Leonard spread his hands loosely. "You couldn't find anything out there after the 'dozers went through. Maybe you saw the mess on your way into town?"

"I saw it. Are you ready for Mrs. Simpson now?"

I was talking to the doctor and the Sergeant, but the question hung in

the air as though it belonged to the dead man on the table. I even had a feeling that he might answer me. The room was getting me down.

I brought Vicky Simpson into it. The time by herself had calmed her. She had strength enough to walk across the room and stand by the table and look down at the ruined head for a minute, for minutes on end.

"It's him. It's Ralph."

She proved it by stroking his dusty hair.

She looked up at Leonard. "What happened to him?"

"He was icepicked, ma'am, a couple of months ago."

"You mean he's been dead all this time?"

"A couple of months."

The two months of waiting seemed to rush across her eyes like dizzy film. She turned blindly. I took her back to the room where the night light burned.

"Do you know who killed him, Vicky?"

"How would I know? I've never even been in Citrus Junction—is that what they call this hole?"

"You mentioned that Ralph was paid by the police to gather information."

"That's what he said. I don't know if it was true or not. Anyway, it was a long time ago."

"Did Ralph have criminal connections?"

"No. He wasn't that kind of a man."

"You said he had a record."

She shook her head.

"You might as well tell me, Vicky. It can't hurt him now."

"It didn't amount to anything," she said. "He was just a kid. He got in with a bad crowd in high school and they got caught smoking reefers one time and they all got sent to Juvie. That was all the record Ralph had."

"You're certain?"

"I'm not lying."

"Did he ever speak of a man named Burke Damis?"

"Burke Damis?"

"Damis is the man I met in Malibu, the one I described to you. He's an artist, a painter, who apparently has been using your husband's name."

"Why would he do that?"

"Perhaps because he's ashamed of his own name. I believe he used Ralph's name to cross the border from Mexico last week. You're sure the name Burke Damis rings no bell?"

"I'm sure."

"And you don't recognize the description?"

"No. At this point I wouldn't recognize my own brother if he walked in the door. Aren't you ever going to leave me alone?"

Leonard came into the room. I suspected that he had been listening outside the door, and chose this moment to break up the interview. He was a kind man, and he said that he and his wife would look after Vicky for the balance of the night.

I drove home to Los Angeles, home to a hot shower and a cold drink and a dark bed.

chapter 8

I HAD A DREAM which I'd been dreaming in variant forms for as long as I could remember. I was back in high school, in my senior year. The girl at the next desk smiled at me snootily.

"Poor Lew. You'll fail the exams."

I had to admit to myself that this was likely. The finals loomed up ahead like the impossible slopes of purgatory, guarded by men with books I hadn't read.

"*I'm* going to college," she said. "What are you going to do?"

I had no idea. I knew with a part of my dreaming mind that I was a grown man in my forties. There wasn't anything more that high school could do to me. Yet here I was, back in Mr. Merritt's classroom, dreading the finals and wondering what I would do when I had failed them.

"You'll have to learn a trade," the snooty one said.

So far it was more or less the dream I had always had. Then something different happened. I said to the girl, rather snootily: "I have a trade, kiddo. I'm a detective. You'll be reading about me in the papers."

I woke up with a warm feeling in my chest and the small birds peeping outside the pale grey rectangle of the window. The dream had never ended this way before. Did it mean that I had made it? That didn't seem likely. You went on making it, or trying to, all your life—working your way up the same old terraced slopes with different street names on them.

The Blackwell case came back on my mind, muffling the bird sounds and draining the last of the warm feeling from my chest. There were two cases, really. One belonged to me and one belonged to the authorities, but they were connected. The link between them was small but definite: the airline envelope with Q. R. Simpson's name on it which Burke Damis, or possibly someone else, had left in the beach house. I wanted to explore

the connection further, without too much interference from the police. The possibility existed that Damis had come by the envelope, or even used the name, quite innocently.

It was broad daylight and the birds had finished their matins when I went back to sleep. I slept late into the morning. Perhaps I was hoping for another good dream. More likely I was fixing my schedule so that I wouldn't have time to report in to Peter Colton.

I had become a great frequenter of airports. Before I set out this time, I dug my birth certificate out of the strongbox in the bedroom closet. I had no definite plan to use it. I just thought it would be nice to have along.

The polite young man at the Mexicana desk greeted me like a long-lost brother. The crew I was interested in had already checked in for their flight, and the steward and stewardess had gone up to the restaurant for coffee. He was tall and dark; she was short and plump and pretty, with red hair. They both had on Mexicana uniforms, and I surely couldn't miss them.

I picked them out in the murmurous cavern of the restaurant, hunched over coffee cups at one of the long counters. The girl had an empty stool beside her, and I slid onto it. She was certainly pretty, though the red hair that curled from under her overseas-type cap had been dyed. She had melting dark eyes and a stung-cherry mouth. Like American airline hostesses, she had on enough make-up to go on the stage.

She was talking in Spanish with the steward, and I waited for a pause in their conversation.

"Miss Gomez?"

"Yessir, what can I do for you?" she said in a pleasantly accented voice.

"I'm looking for a little information. A week ago yesterday, a man and woman I know took your flight from Guadalajara to Los Angeles. That was Monday, July the tenth. You may remember them, or one of them. The woman is quite tall, about your age, blonde. She often wears dark glasses, and she probably had on expensive clothes. Her name is Harriet Blackwell."

She nodded her head emphatically. "I remember Miss Blackwell, yes—a very nice lady. The lady across from her was sick—we had some rough air out of Mazatlán and she took care of the sick lady's baby for her." She said to the steward beside her: "You remember the tall lady who was so nice with the baby?"

"*Sí.*"

"Is Miss Blackwell all right?" she asked me solicitously.

"I think so. Why do you ask?"

"I thought of her afterward, after we landed. And now you are inquiring about her."

"What did you think about her after you landed?"

"I thought—do you speak Spanish? I express myself better in Spanish."

"Your English is ten times better than my Spanish will ever be."

"*Gracias, señor.*" She gave me a full dazzling smile. "Well, I saw her after we landed, going through Customs. She looked very excited. I thought she was going to faint. I approached her and inquired if she was all right. The man with her said that she was all right. He didn't like—he didn't want me asking questions, so I went away."

"Can you describe the man?"

"Yes." She described Burke Damis. "A very beautiful young man," she added with a trace of satire in her voice.

"What was his name?"

"I don't remember."

She turned to her companion and spoke in rapid Spanish. He shrugged. He didn't remember either.

"Who would know?"

"You, perhaps," she said pertly. "You said they were your friends."

"I said I knew them."

"I see. Are they in trouble?"

"That's an interesting question. What brings it up?"

"You," she said. "You look like trouble for them."

"For him, not for her. Did they sit together on the plane?"

"Yes. They embarked together at Guadalajara. I noticed them, I thought they were *recién casados*—honeymooners. But they had different names."

"What was his name?"

"I said I don't remember. If I can find the passenger list—"

"Try and do that, will you?"

"You are a policeman?"

"An investigator."

"I see. Where will I see you?"

"On the plane, if they have a seat for me." I looked at my watch. I had half an hour till flight time.

"We are never crowded in the middle of the week."

She turned out to be right. I bought a return ticket to Guadalajara from my courteous friend, leaving the date of my return open. At another desk in the same building I applied for a Mexican tourist card. The hurried clerk who took my application barely glanced at my birth certificate.

"I'll type up your card *pronto*. Your plane will take off soon."

In the time I had left, I made the necessary call to Colonel Blackwell. He picked up the phone on the first ring, as if he had been waiting there beside it.

"Mark Blackwell speaking."

"This is Archer. Have you heard anything from Harriet?"

"No. I don't expect to." His voice rose shakily from the depths of depression. "You haven't either, I take it."

"No. I have been busy on the case. It took me to the Bay area last night."

"Is that where they've gone?"

"It's possible, but it's not why I went up there. To make a long story short, I stumbled on a murder which Damis may be involved in."

"A murder?" His voice sank almost out of hearing. He said in a rustling whisper: "You're not trying to tell me that Harriet has been murdered?"

"No. It's a man named Simpson, icepicked in Citrus Junction two months ago. I'm trying to trace his connection with Damis, and get a line on Damis's identity and background. The next logical step, as I see it, is to go back to the point where Harriet met him and work forward from there. If it's all right with you, I intend to fly down to Mexico."

There was a long silence on the line. Outside the telephone booth, I could hear my flight being announced over the loudspeakers.

"Are you there, Colonel?"

"I'm here. You're planning to go to Mexico, you say. When?"

"In about five minutes. It's going to cost you a couple of hundred dollars—"

"Money is no object. By all means go if you think it will help."

"I can't guarantee any results, but it's worth trying. Can you give me your ex-wife's address in Ajijic?"

"She doesn't have an address. But any member of the American community should be able to tell you where she lives. Pauline was never one to hide her light under a bushel."

"Her last name is Hatchen?"

"That is correct. Good luck." He sounded as though his own had run out.

The plane was barely half full. I had a window seat over the left wing. As the redheaded stewardess placed me in it, I noticed that she looked at me in a peculiar way.

The broken jigsaw of Los Angeles tilted and drifted backward into brownish smog. When the plane had leveled out at cruising altitude, the stewardess slipped into the empty seat beside me. She held a folded newspaper in the hand away from me. Under the make-up, her color wasn't good.

"I found the seating chart for July—July ten. The man with Miss Blackwell, his name was Simpson, Q. R. Simpson."

"I thought so."

"You thought so?" Her look was accusing. "Why didn't you tell me, then, that Señor Simpson is dead?"

"I wasn't aware of it." It was a half truth, or a half lie, according to which version of Simpson we were talking about. "How do you know he is, Miss Gomez?"

She held the morning *Times* under my nose, jabbing the late bulletins at the bottom of the front page with a chipped carmine fingernail.

"Slain Man Identified," one of the items said.

> The body of Quincy R. Simpson, found icepicked in a shallow grave in Citrus Junction last Friday, was positively identified late last night by his widow. The victim, missing for the past two months, was a resident of San Mateo County. Police suspect a gang killing, according to Sergeant Wesley Leonard of the Citrus County Sheriff's office.

"You see," Miss Gomez insisted, "he is dead. Murdered."

"I see."

"You said you are an investigator. Are you investigating his murder?"

"It's beginning to look like it, isn't it?"

"And you suspect someone from Mexico?" she said in a nationalistic way.

"Someone from the United States."

This relieved her, but not for long. "Poor Miss Blackwell, she was so crazy about him. All the time, even when she was holding the lady's baby, she kept looking at him like"—she searched for a phrase—"like he was a saint."

"He was no saint."

"Was he a *rufian*—a gangster?"

"I doubt it."

"It says in the paper that it was a gang killing."

"Gangsters kill citizens, too."

She wrinkled her dark brows over this idea. The doubleness of the conversation was getting on my nerves; or perhaps it was the doubleness of my attitude toward Damis. In spite of the evidence tightening around him, I was trying to keep an open mind.

I was glad when the girl went to attend to her duties. She stayed away. When she passed me in the aisle, she carefully avoided meeting my eyes. I think she was afraid of the contagion I carried from Simpson's death.

We were flying over the sea within sight of land. The air was perfectly transparent. Baja California passed under the wing like the endless harsh shores of hell, its desolation unbroken by tree or house or human being.

As the sun declined, the shadows of the yellow hills lengthened into the dry valleys. The first green and brown checkerboard of cultivated fields came as a relief to the eye and the mind. The desolation didn't go on forever.

Miss Gomez unbent a little when she brought me my dinner. "Are you enjoying the flight, sir?"

I said yes.

We circled in over Mazatlán in a red sunset. The three rocky islands offshore jutted up angrily out of a streaked purple sea. A single freighter lay in the harbor with the fishing boats. At the other end of the town, beyond the airport where we landed, new apartment buildings stood along the sea like a miniature Copacabana.

We were herded into the terminal building, to have our tourist cards checked, it was explained. A boy was selling, or trying to sell, costumed puppets which he manipulated on a string. His bare arms were almost as thin as the wooden arms of his dolls.

The line of passengers moved forward slowly in steamy heat. I got my turn at the battered rostrumlike desk where a man in an open-necked white shirt presided. He had pockmarks on his face, and they gave special emphasis to his question: "*Certificado de vacunacion, señor?*"

I had none. No one had told me. That was a silly thing to say, but I said it. He leaned toward me not so much in anger as in sorrow.

"You must have the *vacunacion*. I cannot permit you to enter -"

"How do I get one?"

"They will vacunate you *ahora*, now, here."

He summoned an attendant in olive whipcord who escorted me to an office at the far end of the building. A dark and dumpy woman in white was waiting at the desk with a maternal smile. The white masonry wall behind her had jagged cracks in it.

"Vaccination?"

"I'm afraid so."

She took my name and home address on a filing card. "Don't worry, it won't hurt, I never hurt 'em. Jacket off and roll up your left sleeve, please."

She struck my arm smartly as the needle went in.

"You took it well," she said. "Some of them keel over."

"You speak good English."

"Why not? I was a nurse's aide in Fresno six years before I went into training. I got a married daughter in Los Angeles. You can roll down your sleeve now. You'll probably have a reaction by tomorrow."

I buttoned the cuff of my shirt and put on my jacket. "Do you give many of these impromptu vaccinations?"

"Two or three a day, at least, since the government clamped down. People are always forgetting their certificates, or else they didn't get the word in the first place. They process so many at the L.A. airport that they get careless."

I said, on the off-chance of learning something: "A man I know passed through here from L.A. some time in the last two months. I'm wondering if you had to vaccinate him."

"What does he look like?"

I described Burke Damis.

She twisted her mouth to one side. "I think I do remember him. He had big fat biceps, like yours. But he didn't like the needle. He tried to talk himself out of it."

"When was this?"

"I couldn't say exactly. A couple of months ago, like you said. I could look it up if you'll give me his name."

"Quincy Ralph Simpson."

She opened one of the desk drawers, went through a filing box of cards, and picked out one of them.

"*Here* it is, Simpson. I gave him his shot on May twenty."

It meant that Burke Damis had entered Mexico two days after the original Simpson left home for the last time. It probably meant that Simpson had been murdered between May 18 and May 20, more likely than not by the man who had stolen his name.

"A very nice-appearing young man," the woman was saying. "We had a nice chat after we got the vaccination out of the way."

"Chat about what?"

"My daughter in Los Angeles. And he wanted to know if that was earthquake damage." She waved her hand toward the cracks in the masonry.

"I was asking myself the same thing."

"It was no earthquake. The hurricane did it. It practically tore out the whole end of the building. You'd never know it was built in the last ten years."

The man in the whipcord uniform came back. He had two more victims with him, a young couple who were explaining that they had been assured that these formalities could be taken care of when they got to Mexico City. The nurse smiled at them maternally.

chapter 9

IT WAS RAINING HARD when we put down at Guadalajara, as if our descent had ruptured a membrane in the lower sky. In spite of the newspaper tent I held over my head, the short walk from the plane to the terminal pasted my clothes to my back.

I exchanged some damp dollars for some dry pesos and asked the cashier to get me an English-speaking taxi driver, if possible. The porter he dispatched reappeared with a man in a plastic raincoat who grinned at me from under his dripping mustache.

"Yessir, where you want to go?"

"Ajijic, if they have a hotel there."

"Yessir, they have a very nice *posada*."

He led me across the many-puddled parking lot to a fairly new Simca sedan. I climbed squishing into the front seat.

"Wet night."

"Yessir."

He drove me through it for half an hour, entertaining me with fragments of autobiography. Like the nurse who had vaccinated me in Mazatlán, he had learned his English in the Central Valley.

"I was a wetback," he said with some pride. "Three times I walked across the border. Two times they picked me up on the other side and hauled me back on a bus. The third time, I made it, all the way to Merced. I worked around Merced for four years, in the fields. You know Merced?"

"I know it. How were working conditions?"

"Not so good. But the pay, it was very good. I made enough to come back home and go into business." He slapped the wheel of his Simca.

We emerged from between steep black hills onto a lakeshore road. I caught pale glimpses of ruffled water. A herd of burros crossed the head-

lights and galloped away into darkness. Through the streaming windshield they looked like the grey and shrunken ghosts of horses.

Church towers, buttressed by other buildings, rose from the darkness ahead. The rain was letting up, and had stopped by the time we reached the village. Though it was past ten o'clock, children swarmed in the doorways. Their elders were promenading in the steep cobbled streets, which had drained already.

At the corner of the central square an old woman in a shawl had set up a wooden table on the sidewalk. She was serving some kind of stew out of a pot, and I caught a whiff of it as we went by. It had a heady pungency, an indescribable smell which aroused no memories; expectation, maybe, and a smattering of doubt. The smell of Mexico.

I felt closer to home when we reached the *posada*. The night clerk was a big middle-aged American named Stacy, and he was glad to see me. The pillared lobby of the place had a deserted air. Stacy and I and my driver, who was waiting for me just inside the entrance, were the only human beings within sight or sound.

Stacy fussed over me like somebody trying to give the impression that he was more than one person. "I can certainly fix you up, Mr. Archer. I can give you your choice of several nice private cottages."

"Any one of them will do. I think I'll only be staying one night."

He looked disappointed. "I'll send out the *mozo* for your luggage."

"I have no luggage."

"But you're all *wet*, man."

"I know. Luckily this is a drip-dry suit."

"You can't let it dry right on you." He clucked sympathetically. "Listen, you're about my size. I'll lend you some slacks and a sweater if you like. Unless you're thinking of going right to bed."

"I wasn't intending to. You're very kind."

"Anything for a fellow American," he said in a mocking tone which was half serious after all.

He took me through a wet garden to my cottage. It was clean and roomy; a fire was laid in the fireplace. He left me with instructions to use the bottled water, even for cleaning my teeth. I lit the fire and hung up my wet suit on a wall bracket above the mantel.

Stacy came back after a while with an armful of dry clothes. His large rubbery face was flushed with generosity and a meantime drink. The flannel slacks he gave me were big in the waist. I cinched them in with my belt and pulled on his blue turtleneck sweater. It had a big monogrammed "S" like a target over the heart, and it smelled of the kind of piny scent they foist off on men who want to smell masculine.

"You look very nice," Stacy declared.

He stood and watched me in wistful empathy. Perhaps he saw himself with ten pounds shifted from his waistline to his shoulders, and ten lost years regained. He got a bit flustered when I told him I was going out. He may have been looking forward to an intimate conversation by the fire: *And what is your philosophy of life?*

Keep moving, amigo.

Stacy knew where the Hatchens lived, and passed the word in rapid Spanish to my driver. We drove to a nameless street. The only sign at the corner had been painted on a wall by an amateur hand: "*Cristianismo sí, Comunismo no.*" A church tower rose on the far side of the wall.

The Hatchens' gate was closed for the night. I knocked for some time before I got a response. My knocking wasn't the only sound in the neighborhood. Up the street a radio was going full blast; hoofs clip-clopped; a burro laughed grotesquely in the darkness; the bell in the church tower rang the three-quarter hour and then repeated it for those who were hard of hearing; a pig squealed.

A man opened the upper half of the wicket gate and flashed a bright light in my face. "*Quien es?* Are you American?"

"Yes. My name is Archer. You're Mr. Hatchen?"

"Dr. Hatchen. I don't know you, do I? Is there some trouble?"

"Nothing immediate. Back in the States, your wife's daughter, Harriet, has run off with a young man named Burke Damis whom you may know. I came here to investigate him for Colonel Blackwell. Are you and Mrs. Hatchen willing to talk to me?"

"I suppose we can't refuse. Come back in the morning, eh?"

"I may not be here in the morning. If you'll give me a little time tonight, I'll try to make it short."

"All right."

I paid off my driver as Hatchen was opening the lower gate. He led me up a brick walk through an enclosed garden. The flashlight beam jumped along in front of us across the uneven bricks. He was a thin aging man who walked with great strenuosity.

He paused under an outside light before we entered the house. "Just what do you mean when you say Harriet's run off with Damis?"

"She intends to marry him."

"Is that bad?"

"It depends on what I find out about him. I've already come across some dubious things."

"For instance?" He had a sharp wizened face in which the eyes were bright and quick.

"Apparently he came here under an alias."

"That's not unusual. The Chapala woods are full of people living incognito. But come in. My wife will be interested."

He turned on a light in a screened portico and directed me through it to a further room. A woman was sitting there on a couch in an attitude of conscious elegance. Masses of blondish hair were arranged precariously on her head. Her black formal gown accentuated the white puffiness of her shoulders. The classic lines of her chin and throat were a little blurred by time.

"This is Mr. Archer, Pauline. My wife," Hatchen said proudly.

She took my hand with the air of a displaced queen and held onto it in a subtle kind of Indian wrestling until I was sitting beside her on the couch.

"Sit down," she said unnecessarily. "To what do we owe the pleasure?"

"Mr. Archer is an emissary from dear old Mark."

"How fascinating. And what has dear old Mark been up to now? Wait, don't tell me. Let me guess." She held a forefinger upright in front of her nose. "He's worried about Harriet."

"You're a good guesser, Mrs. Hatchen."

She smiled thinly. "It's the same old story. He's always brooded over her like a father hen."

"Mother hen," Hatchen said.

"*Father* hen."

"At any rate, she's run off and married that Damis chap," he said.

"I'm not surprised. I'm glad she had it in her. All Harriet ever needed was a little of her mother's spirit and fortitude. Speaking of spirits, Mr. Archer"—she waved her finger—"Keith and I were just about to have a nightcap. Won't you join us?"

Hatchen looked at her brightly. He was still on his feet in the middle of the room. "You've had your ration, dear one. You know what the doctor said."

"The doctor's in Guad and I'm here."

"I'm here, too."

"So be a sport and get us all a drink. You know what I like."

He shrugged and turned to me. "What will you have?"

"Whisky?"

"I can't recommend the whisky. The gin's okay."

"Gin and tonic will be fine."

He left the room with a nervous glance at his wife, as if she might be contemplating elopement. She turned the full panoply of her charm on me.

"I know you must think I'm a strange sort of mother, totally unconcerned with my daughter's welfare and so on. The fact is I'm a kind of

refugee. I escaped from Mark and his ménage long long ago. I haven't even seen him for thirteen years, and for once that's a lucky number. I turned over a fresh page and started a new chapter—a chapter dedicated to love and freedom." Romanticism soughed in her voice like a loosely strung Aeolian harp.

"It isn't entirely clear to me why you left him."

She took the implied question as a matter of course. "The marriage was a mistake. We had really very little in common. I love movement and excitement, interesting people, people with a sense of life." She looked at me sideways. "You seem to be a man with a sense of life. I'm surprised that you should be a friend of Mark's. He used to spend his spare time doing research on the Blackwell genealogy."

"I didn't say I was a friend of Mark's."

"But I understood he sent you here."

"I'm a private detective, Mrs. Hatchen. He hired me to look into Damis's background. I was hoping you could give me some assistance."

"I barely knew the fellow. Though I sensed from the beginning that Harriet was smitten with him."

"When was the beginning?"

"A few days after she got here. She came a little over a month ago. I was really glad to see her." She sounded surprised. "A little disappointed, perhaps, but glad."

"Why disappointed?"

"I had various reasons. I'd always sort of hoped that she'd outgrow her ugly-duckling phase, and she did to some extent, of course. After all she is my daughter." Her active forefinger went to her brow and moved down her nose to her mouth and chin, which she tilted up. "And I was disappointed that we didn't really have anything in common. She didn't take to our friends or our way of life. We did our best to make her comfortable, but she moved out before the end of the first week."

"And moved in with Damis?"

"Harriet wouldn't do that. She's quite a conventional girl. She rented a studio down near the lake. I think he had one somewhere in the neighborhood. I have no doubt they spent a lot of time together. More power to them, I thought."

"Did you know Burke Damis before she met him?"

"No, and she didn't meet him in our *casa.* We'd seen him around, of course, but we'd never met him till Harriet introduced him. That was a few days after she got here, as I said."

"Where did you see him around?"

"At the *Cantina* mostly. I think that's where Harriet picked—where Harriet met him. A lot of arty young people hang out there, or used to."

"You saw him there before she met him?"

"Oh, yes, several times. He's rather conspicuously good-looking, don't you think?"

"Was he using the name Burke Damis?"

"I suppose so. You could always ask the *Cantina* people. It's just down the street."

"I'll do that. Before Harriet arrived, did Damis ever try to contact you?"

"Never. We didn't know him from Adam." Her eyes narrowed. "Is Mark trying to pin the blame on me for something?"

"No, but it occurred to me that Damis might have had her spotted before she got here."

"Spotted?"

"As a girl with money behind her."

"He didn't learn it from us, if that's what you're thinking."

"And there was nothing to show that he deliberately planned to meet her?"

"I doubt it. He picked her up in the *Cantina* and she was dazzled with gratitude, poor girl."

"Why do you say 'poor girl'?"

"I've always felt that way about Harriet. She had a rough deal, from both of us. I realize I appear to be a selfish woman, leaving her and Mark when she was just a child. But I had no choice if I wanted to save my soul."

I sat there wondering if she had saved it and waiting for her to elaborate. Her eyes had the hardness that comes from seeing too many changes and not being changed by them.

"To make a long story short, and a sordid one, I moved into the Tahoe house and got a Reno divorce. I didn't want to do it. It broke my heart to turn my back on Harriet. But she was very much her father's daughter. There was nothing I could do to break that up, short of murder. And don't think I haven't contemplated murder. But a Nevada divorce seemed more civilized. Keith"—she gestured toward the kitchen, where ice was being picked "Keith was in Nevada on the same errand. What's keeping him out there so long?"

"He may be giving us a chance to talk."

"Yes, he's a very thoughtful man. I've been very happy with Keith, don't think I haven't." There was a hint of defiance in her voice. "On the other hand, don't think I haven't felt guilty about my daughter. When she visited us last month the old guilt feelings came back. It was so obvious that she wanted—that she needed something from me. Something I couldn't give, and if I could, she couldn't have taken it. She still blamed

me for deserting her, as she put it. I tried to explain, but she wouldn't listen to any criticism of her father. He's always dominated her every thought. She went into hysterics, and so did I, I suppose. We quarreled, and she moved out on *me*."

"It looks as though that made her ripe for Damis. I've known other men like him. They prey on girls and women who step outside the protection of their families."

"You make him sound like a very devious type."

"He's devious. Does the name Q. R. Simpson mean anything to you? Quincy Ralph Simpson?"

She shook her head and her hairdo slipped. It made her entire personality seem held in place by pins. "Should I know the name?"

"I didn't really expect you to."

"What name?" her husband said from the doorway. He came in carrying a hammered brass tray with three pale drinks placed geometrically on it.

"The name that Burke Damis used to cross the border, coming and going. Quincy Ralph Simpson."

"I've never heard it."

"You will if you take the California papers."

"But we don't." He passed the drinks around with a flourish. "We are happy fugitives from the California papers, and from nuclear bombs and income taxes—"

"And the high cost of liquor," his wife chimed in like the other half of a vaudeville team.

"This gin costs me forty American cents a liter," he said, "and I don't believe you can top it at any price. Well, *salud*." He lifted his glass.

I drank from mine. The gin was all right, but it failed to warm me. There was something cold and lost about the room and the people in it. They had roosted like migrant birds that had lost their homing instincts, caught in a dream of perpetual static flight. Or so it seemed through the bottom of my glass.

I set it down and got up. Hatchen rose, too.

"What was that about this man Simpson and the newspapers?"

"Simpson was stabbed with an icepick a couple of months ago. His body was found last week."

"And you say Damis was using his name?"

"Yes."

"Is he suspected of Simpson's murder?"

"Yes. By me."

"Poor Harriet," Mrs. Hatchen said over her drink.

chapter 10

THE *Cantina* had several interconnected public rooms, and looked as though it had once been a private house. At eleven-thirty on this Tuesday night it had just about reverted to privacy. A single drinker, a big man with streaked yellow hair that hung down to his collar, sat in a corner behind the deserted bandstand. There was no one else in the place.

A number of small oil paintings hung on the walls. Their blobs and blocks and whorls and scatterations reminded me of the shapes that dissolve on the retina between sleeping and waking. I felt that I was getting closer to Burke Damis, and I moved from picture to picture looking for his style or his signature.

"*Las pinturas*, they are for sale, señor," a mild voice said behind me.

It belonged to a Mexican youth in a waiter's apron. He had a broken nose and a mouth that had been hurt both physically and morally. Intelligence burned like fever in his black eyes.

"Sorry, I don't buy pictures."

"Nobody buys them. No more. 'Quoth the Raven, "Nevermore,"'"

"You read Poe?"

"In school, señor," he said smiling. "'My beautiful Annabel Lee, . . . in this kingdom by the sea.' I studied to be a professor but my father lost his nets, I had to give it up. There is very little money, and work is not easy to find. Tourism is slow this summer."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "Who understands the migration of the birds? I only know it is hard to make an honest living. I tried boxing, but it is not for me." He touched his nose.

His story had come fast and slick, and I was expecting a touch. I

liked him anyway. His battered face had an incandescence, as if the scattered lights of the dark town had gathered and were burning in him. "Something to drink, señor?"

"I guess a beer."

"Dark or light?"

"Light."

"*Bueno*, we have no dark. We have three bottles of light beer, one *litro* of tequila, and no ice. The beer is cold, however. I borrowed it."

Smiling intensely, he went into a side room and came back with a bottle and a glass. He poured the contents of the one into the other.

"You pour beer well."

"Yessir. Also I can make martinis, margueritas, any kind of drink. I work at parties sometimes, which is how I speak English so good. Please to tell your friends, when they need a first-class *cantinero*, José Perez of the *Cantina* is at your service."

"I'm afraid I have no friends in these parts."

"You are a tourist?"

"Sort of. I'm just passing through."

"An artist, *por ventura?*" he said with an eye on Stacy's sweater. "We used to have many artists here. My boss himself is an artist." He glanced across the room to the solitary drinker in the corner.

"I'd like to talk to him."

"I will tell him, señor."

José darted across the room and said something in Spanish to the long-haired man. He picked up his drink and plodded toward me as if the room was hip-deep in water, or eye-deep in tequila. A woven belt with an amethyst-studded silver buckle divided his globular stomach into two hemispheres.

"Aha," he said. "I spy with my little eye a customer and a fellow American."

"Your eye is sound. My name is Archer, by the way."

He stood over me tall and leaning, a Pisan tower of flesh.

"Why don't you sit down?"

"Thank you." He subsided into a chair. "I am Chauncey Reynolds, no kin to Sir Joshua Reynolds, though I do dabble in paint. I've always considered Sir Joshua a better critic than he was a painter. Or don't you share my opinion?" He hunched forward with a touch of belligerence.

"I wouldn't know, Mr. Reynolds. I'm not too hep artistically."

"I thought you were, since you were looking at the paintings. No matter. It's a pleasure to have a customer."

"What happened to all the other customers?"

"*Où sont les neiges d'antan?* This place was jumping, honestly, when

I took over the lease. I thought I had a gold mine on my hands." He looked down into his pudgy hands as if he was surprised by their emptiness. "Then people stopped coming. If the drought of customers persists, I'll close up and go back to work." He seemed to be delivering an ultimatum to himself.

"You paint for a living?"

"I paint. Fortunately I have a small private income. Nobody paints for a *living*. You have to die before you make a living out of painting. Van Gogh, Modigliani, all the great ones had to die."

"What about Picasso?"

"Picasso is the exception that proves the rule. I drink to Pablo Picasso." He raised his glass and drank from it. "What do you do for a living, Mr. Archer?"

"I'm a detective."

He set down his glass with a rap. His bloodshot eyes watched me distrustfully, like a wounded bull from his *querencia*. "Did Gladys send you to ferret me out? She isn't supposed to know where I am."

"I don't know any Gladys."

"Honestly?"

"And I never heard of you until now. Who's Gladys?"

"My ex-wife. I divorced her in Juarez but the New York courts don't recognize it. Which is why, my friend, I am here. Forever." He made it sound like a long time.

"The one I'm interested in," I said, "is a young man named Burke Damis."

"What's he wanted for?"

"He isn't wanted."

"Kid me not. I read a great deal of mystery fiction in the long night watches, and I recognize that look you have on your face. You have the look of a shamus who is about to put the arm on a grifter."

"How well you express yourself. I take it you know Damis."

"In a casual way. He used to pass the time here, mainly before I took over the leash—the lease." He leaned forward over the table, and his long hair flopped like broken wings. "Why do you suppose they all stopped coming? Tell me—you're a trained objective observer—do I have an offensive personality?"

"José tells me business is slow all over," I said noncommittally. "It's like the migrations of the birds."

He looked around for José, who was leaning against the wall, and called for another drink. José replenished his glass from a bottle of tequila.

"Did you ever talk to Damis?"

"Not what you'd call intimately. He's an attractive chap but I never got to know him. He was usually with other people. Do you know if he's still in Ajijic?"

"No. Can you name some of the other people?"

"The one I saw him with most often was Bill Wilkinson."

"How can I get in touch with Wilkinson?"

"You might find him at The Place. I hear he's taking most of his business there since we had our little run-in."

"Run-in?"

"Actually, it was Mrs. Wilkinson I had the run-in with. She's one of those Southern California types who fancies herself as an art collector simply because she has money. I told her what she could do with her money, and Bill would be better off if he did the same. I'm not a woman hater—"

"Neither is Damis, I understand. Did you ever see him with women?"

"Almost invariably. He spent a lot of time with Annie Castle. That was before he took up with the blonde girl, what was her name?" He sat locked in combat with his memory.

"It doesn't matter. Who is Annie Castle?"

"She runs an artsy-craftsy shop on the other side of the plaza. As a matter of fact, Damis has or had his studio on the same premises. No doubt propinquity did its deadly work. Annie's a cute enough kid if you like them dark and serious. But he dropped her when the big little blonde showed up."

"What do you mean, 'big little'?"

"*Quien sabe?* Big girl, little ego, maybe. She hasn't made the breakthrough, into womanhood, you know." He refreshed his alcoholic insight from his glass. "Whenas she ever does, she could be quite a thing. Beauty isn't in the features so much as in the spirit, in the eyes. That's why it's so hard to paint."

"You're quite an observer," I encouraged him.

"I'm a people watcher, my friend. If you're a detective, as you say, you must be something of a people watcher yourself."

"I'm a walking field guide," I said. "You seem to have paid pretty close attention to the blonde girl."

"Oh, I did. What was her name? Miss Blackstone, I believe. Her mother introduced us some time ago. I haven't seen her lately. I tend to take special notice of the tall ones, being rather outsize myself. Gladys is nearly six feet, *mirabile dictu*. She was once a burlesque queen on the Bowery, whence I rescued her and made a model of her, foolish man. With the consequence that I am here on my personal Bowery." His eyes strayed around the empty rooms.

I got up. "Thanks for all the information. Can you tell me how to get to The Place?"

"I can, but look here, man, I'm enjoying this. Drink up your beer, and I'll have José make you a proper drink. Where is José? José!"

"Don't bother. I have to see Bill Wilkinson."

He rose cumbrously. "Whatever you say. Do you feel like telling me what this is all about?"

"I could make up a story for you. But that would be a waste of time." I got out my wallet. "How much do I owe you for the beer?"

"Nothing." He fanned his arm in a lordly gesture which threatened to overbalance him. "You're a stranger within my gates, I couldn't possibly accept your money. Besides, I have a feeling you're going to bring me luck."

"I never have yet, Mr. Reynolds."

He told me how to get to The Place and I set out through the midnight streets. The children had been swallowed up by the doorways. Some men and a very few women were still out. Wrapped in blankets, with faces shadowed by volcano-shaped hats, the men had a conspiratorial look. But when I said "*Buenas noches*" to one small group, a chorus of "*Buenos noches*" followed me.

chapter 11

THE PLACE was closed for the night. Steering a course by dead reckoning and the sound of the town clock chiming the quarter, I made my way back to the central square. It was abandoned except for one lone man locked behind the grille of the unicellular jail.

Followed by his Indian gaze, I took myself for a walk around the perimeter of the square. Seven eighths of the way around, I was stopped by a sign in English hand-lettered on wood: "Anne's Native Crafts." The shutters were up but there was light behind them, and the thump and clack of some rhythmic movement.

The noise stopped when I knocked on the door beside the shutters. Heels clicked on stone, and the heavy door creaked open. A smallish woman peered out at me.

"What do you want? It's very late."

"I realize that, Miss Castle. But I'm hoping to fly out of here in the morning, and I thought since you were up—"

"I know who you are," she said accusingly.

"News travels fast in Ajijic."

"Does it not? I can also tell you that you're here to no purpose. Burke Damis left Ajijic some time ago. It's true I sublet a studio to him for a brief period. But I can tell you nothing whatever about him."

"That's funny. You know all about me, and you never even saw me before."

"There's nothing funny about it. The waiter at the *Cantina* is a friend of mine. I taught his sister to weave."

"That was nice of you."

"It was part of the normal course of my life and work. You are dis-

tinctly not. Now if you'll take your big foot out of my doorway, I can get back to my weaving."

I didn't move. "You work very late."

"I work all the time."

"So do I when I'm on a case. That gives us something in common. I think we have something else in common."

"I can't imagine what it would be."

"You're concerned about Burke Damis, and so am I."

"Concerned?" Her voice went tinny on the word. "I don't know what you mean."

"I don't either, Miss Castle. You would have to tell me."

"I'll tell you nothing."

"Are you in love with Burke Damis?"

"I certainly am not!" she said passionately, telling me a great deal. "That's the most absurd statement—question, that anyone ever asked me."

"I'm full of absurd questions. Will you let me come in and ask you some of them?"

"Why should I?"

"Because you're a serious woman, and serious things are happening. I didn't fly down from Los Angeles for fun."

"What *is* happening then?"

"Among other things," I said, "Burke has eloped with a young woman who doesn't know which end is up."

She was silent for a long moment. "I know Harriet Blackwell, and I quite agree with your description of her. She's an emotionally ignorant girl who threw—well, she practically threw herself at his head. There's nothing I can do about it, or want to."

"Even if she's in danger?"

"Danger from Burke? That's impossible."

"It's more than possible, in my opinion, and I've been giving it a good deal of thought."

She moved closer to me. I caught the glint of her eyes, and her odor, light and clean, devoid of perfume. "Did you really come all the way from the States to ask me about Burke?"

"Yes."

"Has he—done something to Harriet Blackwell?"

"I don't know. They've dropped out of sight."

"What makes you suspect he's done something?"

"I'll tell you if you'll tell me. We both seem to have the same idea."

"No. You're putting words into my mouth."

"I wouldn't have to, if you'd talk to me."

"Perhaps I had better," she said to me and her conscience. "Come in, Mr. Archer." She even knew my name.

I followed her into the room behind her shop. A wooden hand loom stood in one corner, with a piece of colored fabric growing intricately on it. The walls and furniture were covered with similar materials in brilliant designs.

Anne Castle was quite brilliant in her own way. She wore a multicolored Mexican skirt, an embroidered blouse, in her ears gold hoops that were big enough to swing on. Black hair cut short emphasized her petiteness and the individuality of her looks. Her eyes were brown and intelligent, and warmer than her voice had let me hope.

She said when we were seated on the divan: "You were going to tell me what Burke has done."

"I'd rather have your account of him first, for psychological reasons."

"You mean," she said carefully, "that I may not want to talk after you've done your talking?"

"Something like that."

"Is it so terrible?"

"It may be quite terrible. I don't know."

"As terrible as murder?" She sounded like a child who names the thing he fears, the dead man walking in the attic, the skeleton just behind the closet door, in order to be assured that it doesn't exist.

"Possibly. I'm interested in your reasons for suggesting it."

"Well," she hedged, "you said Harriet Blackwell was in danger."

"Is that all?"

"Yes. Of course." The skeleton had frightened her away from the verge of candor. She covered her retreat with protestations: "I'm sure you must be mistaken. They seem fond of each other. And you couldn't describe Burke as a violent man."

"How well did you know him, Miss Castle?"

She hesitated. "You asked me, before, if I was in love with him."

"I apologize for my bluntness."

"I don't care. Is it so obvious? Or has Chauncey Reynolds been telling tales out of school?"

"He said that you were seeing a lot of Burke, before Harriet Blackwell entered the picture."

"Yes. I've been trying ever since to work him out of my system. With not very striking success." She glanced at the loom in the corner. "At least I've gotten through a lot of work."

"Do you want to tell me the story from the beginning?"

"If you insist. I don't see how it can help you."

"How did you meet him?"

"In a perfectly natural way. He came into the shop the day after he got here. His room at the *posada* didn't suit him, because of the light. He was looking for a place to paint. He said he hadn't been able to paint for some time, and he was burning to get at it. I happened to have a studio I'm not using, and I agreed to rent it to him for a month or so."

"Is that how long he wanted it for? A month?"

"A month or two, it wasn't definite."

"And he came here two months ago?"

"Almost to the day. When I think of the changes there have been in just two months—!" Her eyes reflected them. "Anyway, the day he moved in, I had to make a speed trip to Guad. One of my girls has a rheumatic heart and she needed emergency treatment. Burke came along for the ride, and I was impressed by his kindness to the girl she's one of my best students. After we took her to the hospital we went to the *Copa de Leche* for lunch and really got to know each other.

"He talked to me about his plans as an artist. He's still caught up in abstraction but he's trying to use that method to penetrate more deeply into life. It's his opinion that the American people are living through a tragedy unconsciously, suffering without knowing that we are suffering or what the source of the suffering may be. He thinks it's in our sexual life." She flushed suddenly. "Burke is very verbal for a painter."

"I hadn't noticed," I said. "Who paid for the lunch?"

Her flush deepened. "You know quite a bit about him, don't you? I paid. He was broke. I also took him to an artists' supply house and let him charge four hundred pesos' worth of paints on my account. It was my suggestion, not his, and I don't regret it."

"Did he pay you back?"

"Of course."

"Before or after he attached himself to Harriet Blackwell?"

"Before. It was at least a week before she got here."

"What did he use for money?"

"He sold a picture to Bill Wilkinson, or rather to his wife—she's the one with the money. I tried to persuade him not to sell it or, if he insisted, to sell it to me. But he was determined to sell it to her, and she was determined to have it. She paid him thirty-five hundred pesos, which was more than I could afford. Later on he regretted the sale and tried to buy the picture back from the Wilkinsons. I heard that they had quite a ruction about it."

"When was this?"

"A couple of weeks ago. I only heard about it at second hand. Burke and I were no longer speaking, and I have nothing to do with the

Wilkinsons. Bill Wilkinson is a drunk married to a woman older than himself and living on her." She paused over the words, perhaps because they had accidentally touched on her relations with Damis. "They're dangerous people."

"I understand that Wilkinson was Burke's boon companion."

"For a while. Bill Wilkinson is quite perceptive, in the sense that he understands people's weaknesses, and Burke was taken in by him for a while."

"Or vice versa?"

"That was not the case. What would a man like Burke have to gain from a man like Bill Wilkinson?"

"He sold his wife a picture for thirty-five hundred pesos."

"It's a very good picture," she said defensively, "and cheap at the price. Burke isn't ever high on his own work, but even he admitted that it was the kind of tragic painting he was aiming at. It wasn't like his other things, apart from a few sketches. As a matter of fact, it's representational."

"Representational?"

"It's a portrait," she said, "of a lovely young girl. He called it 'Portrait of an Unknown Woman.' I asked him if he'd ever known such a woman. He said perhaps he had, or perhaps he dreamed her."

"What do you think?"

"I think he must have known her, and painted her from memory. I never saw a man work so ferociously hard. He painted twelve and fourteen hours a day. I had to make him stop to eat. I'd walk into the studio with his *comida,* and he'd be working with the tears and sweat running down his face. He'd paint himself blind, then he'd go off on the town and get roaring drunk. I'd put him to bed in the wee hours, and he'd be up in the morning painting again."

"He must have given you quite a month."

"I loved it," she said intensely. "I loved him. I still do."

It was an avowal of passion. If there was some hysteria in it, she had it under control. Everything was under control, except that she worked all the time.

We sat there smiling dimly at each other. She was an attractive woman, with the kind of honesty that chisels the face in pure lines. I recalled what Chauncey Reynolds had said in drunken wisdom about Harriet, that she hadn't made the breakthrough into womanhood. Anne Castle had.

I kept my eyes on her face too long. She rose and moved across the room with hummingbird vitality, and opened a portable bar which stood against the wall:

"May I give you something to drink, Mr. Archer?"

"No, thanks, there's a long night coming up. After you and I have finished, I'm going to try and see the Wilkinsons. I want a look at that portrait they bought, for one thing."

She closed the door of the bar, sharply. "Haven't we finished?"

"I'm afraid not, Miss Castle."

She came back to the divan. "What more do you want from me?"

"I still don't understand Damis and his background. Did he ever talk about his previous life?"

"Some. He came from somewhere in the Middle West. He studied at various art schools."

"Did he name them?"

"If he did, I don't remember. Possibly Chicago was one of them. He knew the Institute collection. But most painters do."

"Where did he live before he came to Mexico?"

"All over the States, I gathered. Most of us have."

"Most of the people here, you mean?"

She nodded. "This is our fifty-first state. We come here when we've run through the other fifty."

"Burke came here from California, we know that. Did he ever mention San Mateo County, or the Bay area in general?"

"He'd spent some time in San Francisco. He was deeply familiar with the El Grecos in the museum there."

"Painting is all he ever talked about, apparently."

"He talked about everything under the sun," she said, "except his past life. He *was* reticent about that. He did tell me he'd been unhappy for years, that I'd made him happy for the first time since he was a boy."

"Then why did he turn his back on you so abruptly?"

"That's a very painful question, Mr. Archer."

"I know it, and I'm sorry. I'm trying to understand how the Blackwell girl got into the picture."

"I can't explain it," she said with a little sigh. "Suddenly there she was, spang in the middle of it."

"Had he ever mentioned her before she arrived?"

"No. They met here, you see."

"And he had no previous knowledge of her?"

"No. Are you implying that he was lying in wait for her or something equally melodramatic?"

"My questions don't imply anything. They're simply questions. Do you happen to know where they first met?"

"At a party at Helen Wilkinson's. I wasn't there, so I can't tell you who introduced whom to whom, or who was the aggressor, shall we say. I do know it was love at first sight." She added dryly: "On her part."

"What about his part?"

Her clear brow knotted, and she looked almost ugly for a moment. "It's hard to say. He dropped me like the proverbial hotcake when she hove into sight. He dropped his painting, too. He spent all his time with her for weeks, and finally went off with her. Yet the few times I saw them together—he was still living here, but I arranged to see as little of him as possible—I got the impression that he wasn't terribly attracted to her."

"What do you base that on?"

"Base is too definite a word for what I have to go on—the way he looked at her and the way he didn't look. He struck me as a man doing a job, doing it with rather cold efficiency. That may be wishful thinking on my part."

I doubted that it was. I'd seen the lack of interest in his face the day before, in the Malibu house, when Harriet ran to him across the room.

"I don't believe you do much wishful thinking, Miss Castle."

"Do I not? But they didn't seem to talk about each other, as people in love are supposed to. As Burke and I did when we were together." The ugly darkness caught in her brow again. "They talked about how much money her father had, and what a beautiful place he maintained at Lake Tahoe. Things like that," she said contemptuously.

"Just what was said about the place at Tahoe?"

"She described it to him in some detail, as if she was trying to sell a piece of real estate. I know I'm being hard on her, but it was hard to listen to. She went on for some time about the great oaken beams, and the stone fireplace where you could roast an ox if you had an ox, and the picture window overlooking the lake. The disheartening thing was, Burke was intensely interested in her very materialistic little recital."

"Did she say anything about taking him there?"

"I believe she did. Yes, I remember she suggested that it would be an ideally secluded place for a honeymoon."

"This may be the most helpful thing you've told me yet," I said. "How did you happen to overhear it, by the way?"

She tugged at one of her earrings in embarrassment. "I didn't mean to let that slip. I might as well confess, though, while I'm confessing all. I eavesdropped on them. I didn't intend to do it, but he brought her to the studio several nights in a row, and my good intentions broke down. I had to know what they were saying to each other." Her voice took on a satiric lilt: "So she was saying that her father had oodles of money and three houses, and Burke was drinking it in. Maybe he had an underprivileged childhood, who knows?"

"It's a funny thing about con men, they often come from respectable well-heeled families."

"He *isn't* a confidence man. He's a good painter."

"I have to reserve my judgment, on both counts. It might be a good idea for you to reserve yours."

"I've been trying, these last weeks. But it's fearfully hard, when you've made a commitment—" She moved her hands helplessly.

"I'd like to have a look at the studio you rented him. Would that be possible?"

"If you think it will help in any way."

On the far side of the courtyard, where a Volkswagen was parked for the night, a detached brick building with a huge window stood against the property wall. She unlocked the door and turned on a lamp inside. The big bare-walled room smelled of insecticide. Several unsittable-looking pigskin-covered chairs were distributed around the tile floor. A cot with its thin mattress uncovered stood in one corner. The only sign of comfort was the hand-woven drapes at the big window.

"He lived frugally enough here," I said.

"Just like a monk in his cell." Her inflection was sardonic. "Of course I've stripped the place since he moved out. That was a week ago Sunday."

"He didn't fly to Los Angeles until the following day."

"I presume he spent the last night with her."

"They were spending nights together, were they?"

"Yes. I don't know what went on in the course of the nights. You mustn't think I spied on them persistently. I only broke down the once." She folded her arms across her breasts and stood like a small monument, determined never to break down again. "You see me in my nakedness, Mr. Archer. I'm the classic case of the landlady who fell in love with her star boarder and got jilted."

"I don't see you in that light at all."

"What other light could you possibly see me in?"

"You'd be surprised. Have you ever been married, Miss Castle?"

"Once. I left Vassar to get married, to a poet, of all things. It didn't work out."

"So you exiled yourself to Mexico?"

"It's not that simple, and neither am I," she said with a complicated smile. "You couldn't possibly understand how I feel about this place. It's as ancient as the hills and as new as the Garden of Eden—the real New World—and I love to be a part of it." She added sadly, her mind revolving around a single pole: "I thought that Burke was beginning to feel the same."

I moved around the room and in and out of the bathroom at the rear. It was all bare and clean and unrevealing. I came back to her.

"Did Damis leave much behind him, in the way of things?"

"He left no personal things, if that's what you're interested in. He had nothing when he came here and not much more when he left, except for his brushes."

"He came here with nothing at all?"

"Just the clothes he had on, and they were quite used up. I persuaded him to have a suit made in Guad. Yes, I paid for it."

"You did a lot for him."

"Nada."

"Did he give you anything in return?"

"I didn't want anything from him."

"No keepsakes or mementos?' "

She hesitated. "Burke gave me a little self-portrait. It's only a sketch he tossed off. I asked him for it."

"May I see it?"

"If you like."

She locked up the studio and took me back across the courtyard to her bedroom. Framed in bamboo, the small black and white picture hung on the wall above her smooth bed. The sketch was too stylized to be a perfect likeness, and one eye was for some reason larger than the other, but Burke Damis was easily recognizable in it. He glared out somberly from a nest of crosshatched lines.

Anne Castle stood and answered his look with defensive arms folded across her breasts.

"I have a favor to ask you. A big one."

"You want the sketch," she said.

"I promise you'll get it back."

"But you must know what he looks like. You've seen him, haven't you?"

"I've seen him, but I don't know who I've seen."

"You think he's using a false name?"

"I believe he's using at least two aliases. Burke Damis is one. Quincy Ralph Simpson is another. Did he ever use the Simpson name when he was with you?"

She shook her head. The movement left her face loose and expectant.

"He came to Mexico under the Simpson name. He used it again when he left. There's a strange thing about the name Quincy Ralph Simpson. The man who originally owned it is dead."

Her head moved forward on her neck. "How did he die?"

"Of an icepick in the heart, two months ago, in a town near Los Angeles called Citrus Junction. Did Burke ever mention Citrus Junction to you?"

"Never." Her arms had fallen to her sides. She looked at the bed, and then sat down on it. "Are you trying to tell me that Burke killed him?"

"Burke, or whatever his name is, is the leading suspect in my book, so far the only one. He left the United States shortly after Simpson disappeared. It's virtually certain he was using Simpson's papers."

"Who was Simpson?"

"A little man of no importance who wanted to be a detective."

"Was he after Burke for—some crime?"

Her voice had overtones and undertones. The dead man was walking in the attic again. The skeleton hung behind her half-shuttered eyes.

"You brought up the subject of murder before," I said. "Is that the crime you have in mind?"

She looked from me to the picture on the wall and back at me. She said miserably: "Did Burke kill a woman?"

"It's not unlikely," I said in a neutral tone.

"Do you know who she was?"

"No. Do you?"

"He didn't tell me her name, or anything else about her. All he said—" She straightened up, trying to discipline her thoughts. "I'll see if I can reconstruct exactly what he did say. It was our first night together. He'd been drinking, and he was in a low mood. Post-coital *tristesse*, I believe they call it."

She was being cruel to herself. Her fingers worked in the coverlet of her bed. One of her hands, still working, went to her breast. She was no longer looking at me.

"You were going to tell me what he said, Miss Castle."

"I can't."

"You already have, in a sense."

"I shouldn't have spoken. Jilted landlady betrays demon lover. I didn't think that was my style. I'm a hopeless creature," she said, and flung herself sideways with her face in the pillow, her legs dragging on the floor.

They were good legs, and I was aware of it, in the center of my body as well as in my head. A wave of feeling went through me; I wanted to comfort her. But I kept my hands off. She had more memories than she could use, and so had I.

The memory I was interested in came out brokenly, half smothered by the pillow. "He said he was bad luck to his women. I should have nothing to do with him if I liked my neck in one piece. He said that that had happened to his last one."

"What happened to her?"

"She was choked to death. It was why he had to leave the States."

"That implies he was responsible for her death. Did he make a confession to you?"

"He didn't say it outright. It was more of a threat to me, or a warning. I suppose he was bullying me. But he never actually hurt me. He's very strong, too. He could have hurt me."

"Did he ever repeat the confession, or the threat?"

"No, but I often thought of it afterward. I never brought it up, though. I was always a little afraid of him after that. It didn't stop my loving him. I'd love him no matter what he'd done."

"Two murders take a lot of doing, and a very special kind of person to do them."

She detached her face from the comfort of the pillow and sat up, smoothing her skirt and then her hair. She was pale and shaken, as if she'd been through a bout of moral nausea.

"I can't believe that Burke is that kind of person."

"Women never can about the men they love."

"Just what evidence is there against him?"

"What I've told you, and what you've told me."

"But it doesn't amount to anything. He might have been simply *talking*, with me."

"You didn't think so at the time, or later. You asked me right off if murder was involved. And I have to tell you that it certainly is. I saw Ralph Simpson's body just twenty-four hours ago."

"But you don't know who the woman was?"

"Not yet. I have no information on Damis's past life. It's why I came here, and why I want to borrow your picture of him."

"What use will you make of it?"

"An acquaintance of mine is art critic on one of the L.A. papers. He knows the work of a lot of young painters, and quite a few of them personally. I want to show the sketch to him and see if he can put a name to your friend."

"Why do you think Burke Damis isn't his name?"

"If he's on the run, as he seems to be, he wouldn't be using his own name. He entered Mexico under the Simpson alias, as I told you. There's one other little piece of evidence. Did you ever notice a shaving kit he had, in a leather case?"

"Yes. It was just about his only possession."

"Do you recall the initials on it?"

"I don't believe I do."

"'B.C.,'" I said. "They don't go with the name Burke Damis. I'm very eager to know what name they do go with. That picture may do it."

"You can have it," she said, "and you don't have to send it back. I shouldn't have hung it here anyway. It's too much like self-flagellation."

She took it off its hook and gave it to me, talking me out of the room and herself out of her embarrassed pain. "I'm a very self-flagellant type. But I suppose it's better than having other people do it to you. And so very much more economical—it saves paying the middlemen."

"You talk a great deal, Anne."

"Too much, don't I? Much too much too much."

But she was a serviceable woman. She gave me a bag of woven straw to carry the picture in, backed her Volkswagen out over my protests, and drove me out to the Wilkinsons' lakefront house. It was past one but the chances were, she said, that Bill and his wife would still be up. They were late risers and late drinkers.

She turned in at the top of their lane and kept her headlights on the barbed-wire gate while I unfastened it and closed it behind me. Then she gave a little toot on her horn and started back toward the village.

I didn't expect to see her again, and I regretted it.

chapter 12

MUSIC DRIFTED from the house. It was old romantic music of the twenties, poignant and sweet as the jasmine on the air. The dooryard was thickly planted with shrubbery and trees. Wide terraces descended from it to the lake, which glimmered faintly in the middle distance.

I bumped my head on a low-hanging fruit which was probably a mango. Above the trees the stars hung in the freshly cleared sky like clusters of some smaller, brighter fruit too high to reach.

I knocked on the heavy door. A woman spoke over the music: "Is that you, Bill?"

I didn't answer. After a minute's waiting she opened the door. She was blonde and slim in something diaphanous. She also wore in her right hand a clean-looking .38 revolver pointed at my stomach.

"What do you want?"

"A little talk. My name is Archer and I'm only here overnight and I realize this is a poor time to come bothering you—"

"You haven't told me what you want."

"I'm a private detective investigating a crime."

"We don't have crime here," she said sharply.

"This crime occurred up north."

"What makes you think that I know anything about it?"

"I'm here to ask you, is all."

She moved back, and waved the revolver commandingly. "Come in under the light and let me see you."

I stepped into a room so huge that its far corners were in darkness. Gershwin spilled in a nostalgic cascade from a massive hi-fi layout against one wall. The blonde woman was heavily made up in an old-fashioned

way, as if she had been entertaining ghosts. Her triangular face had the taut immobility that plastic surgery often leaves behind.

She looked at my feet and swept her eyes up my body like searchlights, half occulted by eye shadow. I recognized the way she used her eyes. I'd seen it a dozen times before through the fallout of old late movies, and earlier still, when I was a juvenile patron of the Long Beach movie houses and she was a western leading lady smirking and ogling her way out of triangular relationships with horses.

I reached deep for her movie name, but I couldn't quite dredge it up.

"You're fairly pretty," she said. "Isn't that Claude Stacy's sweater you're wearing?"

"He lent it to me. My clothes got rained on."

"I gave him that sweater. Are you a friend of Claude's?"

"Not an intimate one."

"That's good. You don't *look* his type. Do you like women?"

"Put the gun away and I'll give you a truthful answer," I said with the necessary smile.

She responded with a smile of her own, a 1929 smile that rested on her mouth like a footnote to history. "Don't let the gun bother you. I learned to handle a gun when I was playing in westerns. My husband insists I keep it handy when I'm alone at night. Which I usually am."

She laid the revolver down on a table near the door and turned back to me. "You haven't told me if you like women or not."

"I like individual women. I've liked you, for example, for a longer time than either of us would care to admit." The name she had used as an actress had come back to me. "You're Helen Holmes, aren't you?"

She lit up coldly and brightly, like a marquee. "You remember me. I thought everyone had forgotten."

"I was a fan," I said, spreading it not too thick.

"How nice!" She clenched her hands at her shoulders and jumped a few inches off the floor, with both feet, her smile immobile. "For that you may sit you down and I'll pour you a drink and tell you anything you want to know. Except about me. Name your poison."

"Gin and tonic, since you're so kind."

"One gin and tonic coming up."

She turned on a gilt chandelier which hung like a barbaric treasure among the ceiling beams. The room was like an auctioneer's warehouse, crowded with furniture of various periods and countries. Against a distant wall stood an ornately carved bar, backed by shelves of bottles, with half a dozen leather-covered stools in front of it.

"Come sit at the bar. It's cozier."

I sat and watched her mix my drink. For herself she compounded

something out of tequila and grenadine, with coarse salt sprinkled around the rim of the glass. She stayed behind the bar to drink it, leaning on her forearms and exposing her bosom like a barmaid favoring a customer.

"I won't waste time beating around the bush. I'm interested in Burke Damis. You know him, Mrs. Wilkinson?"

"Slightly. He is, or was, a friend of my husband's."

"Why do you put it in the past tense?"

"They had a quarrel, some time before Mr. Damis left here."

"What about?"

"You ask very direct questions."

"I don't have time for my usual subtlety."

"*That* must be something to experience."

"Oh, it is. What did they quarrel about?"

"Me, if you have to know. Poor little old me." She fluttered her eyelashes. "I was afraid they were going to kill each other, honestly. But Bill contented himself with burning the picture. That way he got back at both of us." She raised one hand like a witness. "Now don't ask me for doing what. There wasn't any *what*. It's just that Bill is very insecure in our relationship."

"He burned the 'Portrait of an Unknown Woman'?"

"Yes, and I haven't forgiven him for it," she said, as though this were proof of character. "He broke up the frame and tore the canvas and put the whole thing in the fireplace and set fire to it. Bill can be quite violent sometimes."

She sipped her drink and licked the salt from her lips with a pale pointed tongue. She reminded me of a cat, not a domestic cat, but one of the larger breeds that could stalk men. Her bright lips seemed to be savoring the memory of violence.

"Did Damis know the picture was destroyed?"

"I told him. It broke him up. He wept actual tears, can you imagine?"

"I wonder why."

"It was his best picture, he said. I liked it, too."

"I heard he'd tried to buy it back."

"He did, but I wouldn't part with it." Between the shadowed lids her eyes were watchful. "Who else have you been talking to?"

"Various people around the village."

"Claude Stacy?"

"No. Not yet."

"Why are you so interested in that particular picture?"

"I'm interested in everything Damis does."

"You mentioned a crime that occurred up north. Do you want to let down your back hair about it? I've been letting down my back hair."

I told her what had happened to Quincy Ralph Simpson. She looked somehow disappointed, as if she'd been expecting something more lurid.

"This is all new to me," she said. "There's nothing I can tell you about Simpson."

"Let's get back to the picture then. Damis called it a portrait. Did he ever say who the subject of it was?"

"He never did," she said shortly.

"Do you have any ideas?"

She shrugged her shoulders and made a stupid face, with her mouth turned down at the corners.

"You must have had a reason for buying the painting and wanting to keep it. Your husband cared enough about it to burn it."

"I don't know who the woman was," she said, too forcefully.

"I think you do."

"Think away. You're getting rather boring. It's late, and I have a headache." She drew her fingers across her forehead. "Why don't you drink up and go?"

I left my drink where it was on the bar between us. "I'm sorry if I pressed too hard. I didn't mean to—"

"Didn't you?" She finished her drink and came around the end of the bar, licking her lips. "Come on, I'll let you out."

It had been a very quick party. Reluctantly I followed her to the door.

"I was hoping to ask you some questions about Harriet Blackwell. I understand Damis met her here at your house."

"So what?" she said, and pulled the door open. "Out."

She slammed it behind me. In the dooryard I bumped my head on the same low-hanging fruit. I picked it—it was a mango—and took it along with me as a souvenir.

It was a long walk back, but I rather enjoyed it. It gave me a chance to think, among other things about Helen Holmes Wilkinson. Our rather tenuous relationship, based on Claude Stacy's sweater and my remembering her movie name, had broken down over the identity of the woman in the burned portrait. I would give odds that she knew who the woman was and what her connection with Damis had been.

I wondered about Helen's own connection with Damis.

Headlights approached me, coming very fast from the direction of the village. They belonged to a beetle-shaped Porsche which swerved in long arcs from one side of the road to the other. I had to slide into the ditch to avoid being run over. As the Porsche went by I caught a glimpse of the driver's face, pale under flying dark hair. I threw my mango at him.

The clock chimed two quarters—half-past two—as I struggled through the village to the *posada*. In the room behind the desk, Claude

Stacy was sleeping in his clothes on a mohair couch. It was a couch with one high end, the kind psychiatrists use, and he was curled up on it in foetal position.

I shook him. He grimaced and snorted like a huge old baby being born into a world he never made.

"What is it?"

"I met a friend of yours tonight. Helen Wilkinson. She mentioned you."

"Did she now?" He took a comb out of his pocket and ran it through his thinning hair. "I hope it was complimentary."

"Very," I lied.

He basked in the imaginary compliment. "Oh, Helen and I get along. If Bill Wilkinson hadn't got to her first I might have thought of marrying her myself." He thought about it now. "She used to be in pictures, you know, and she saved her money. I did some acting at one time myself. But I didn't hang on to any money."

"What does Bill Wilkinson do for a living?"

"Nothing. He must be twenty years younger than Helen is," he said by way of explanation. "You'd never know it, she's so beautifully preserved. And Bill has let himself go frightfully. He used to be a Greek god, I mean it."

"Have you known him long?"

"Years and years. It's through him I got to know Helen. He married her a couple of years ago, after his folks stopped sending him money. I wouldn't say he married her for her money, but he married where money is. Tennyson." Stacy giggled. "It drives him out of his mind when Helen even *looks* at another man."

"She looks at other men?"

"I'm afraid she does. She was interested in me at one time." He flushed with vanity. "Of course I wouldn't steal another fellow's wife. Bill knows he can trust me. Bill and I have been buddy-buddy for years."

"Have you seen him tonight?"

"No, I haven't. I think he went to a party in Guadalajara. He has some very good connections. His family are very well-known people in Texas."

"Does he drive a Porsche?"

"If you can call it driving. His driving is one reason he had to leave Texas."

"I can believe it. He almost ran me down on the road just now."

"Poor old Bill. Some night he's going to end up in the ditch with a broken neck. And maybe I'll marry Helen after all, who knows?" The prospect failed to cheer him. "I need a drink, old chap. Will you have one with me?"

"All right. Drinking seems to be the favorite indoor sport around here."

He looked at me to see if I was accusing him of being a drunk. I smiled. He gave me a Mexican-type shrug and got a bottle of Bacardi out from under the high end of the couch. He poured some into paper cups from a dispenser that hung on the wall beside the bottled water. I added water to mine.

"*Salud,*" he said. "If you don't mind my asking, how did you happen to run into Helen Wilkinson?"

"I went to see her."

"Just like that?"

"I happen to be a private investigator."

He sat bolt upright. His drink slopped over the rim of the cup. I wondered what old scandal had the power to galvanize him.

"I thought you were a tourist," he said resentfully.

"I'm a detective, and I came here to investigate a man who calls himself Burke Damis. I think he stayed with you for a night or two."

"One night," Stacy said. "So it's really true about him, after all? I hated to believe it—he's such a fine-looking chap."

"You hated to believe what?"

"That he murdered his wife. Isn't that why you're after him?"

With the aid of a little rum and water I made a quick adjustment. "These rumors get around. Where did you happen to pick that one up?"

"It was going the rounds, as you say. I think it started when Bill Wilkinson told somebody at The Place that he was going to report Damis as an undesirable alien." Stacy sounded like a connoisseur of rumors, who collected them as other men collected notable sayings or pictures or women. "The government has been bearing down on undesirables, rounding them up and sending them back across the border. Like wetbacks in reverse."

"And Wilkinson turned Damis in?"

"I don't believe he actually did, but he threatened to. Which is probably why Damis got out in a hurry. So he really is one jump ahead of the law?"

"A long jump," I said. "This rumor interests me. What exactly was said?"

"Simply that Damis—which wasn't his real name—was wanted for the murder of his wife."

"How do you know it isn't his real name?"

"*I* don't know *any*thing. It was all part of the rumor. I pestered Bill and Helen for more details, but they refused to talk—"

"They know more details, do they?"

"I would say so."

"Where did they get them?"

"I've asked myself that question many times. I know they made their border trip last May and spent a week or so in California. That's when the murder occurred, isn't it? Maybe they read about it in the newspapers. But if they knew all about it, I can't understand why they would get chummy with the man. The three of them were very buddy-buddy for a while, before Bill turned against him. Helen got too interested in Damis."

"But Damis had a girl of his own." Or two. Or three.

He smiled indulgently. "That wouldn't stop Helen."

"Do you know the girl he left here with—Harriet Blackwell?"

"I met her once, at a party."

"Where did Damis meet her?"

"Same party, at Helen Wilkinson's. Helen told me he asked her to invite her."

"Damis asked Helen to invite Harriet to the party?"

"That's what I said."

"So that he could meet Harriet?"

"Apparently. I only know what I hear."

The interview was beginning to depress me. Stacy's eyes had a feeding look, as if he lived on these morsels and scraps of other people's lives. Perhaps I feared a similar fate for myself.

He poured himself more Bacardi and offered me some. I turned it down, politely. If I wanted to get back to California tomorrow—and now I was determined to—I had some further legwork to do tonight.

"Tell me, Mr. Stacy, is there a taxi in the village?"

"There's a man who drives people. You'd have a frightful time routing him out at three in the morning. Why?"

"I have to get out to the Wilkinsons, and I don't feel like walking it again."

"I'll drive you."

"You're very hospitable."

"Think nothing of it. This is *exciting* for me. I'll take you on one condition, that you don't tell Bill or Helen I had any part in this. The connection is important to me, you know."

"Sure."

He brought his battered Ford around to the entrance and drove me out the lake road. Roosters were crowing in the dark countryside. Stacy parked at the head of the Wilkinsons' lane and let me go in by myself.

The Wilkinsons were having an argument which was loud enough to penetrate the walls. I stood outside the front door and listened to it.

She called him an alcoholic. He said she couldn't talk to a Charro

like that. She said it took more than a Charro hat to make a Charro, that he was a Charro like she was a member of the DAR.

He called her a sexoholic. She told him if he didn't watch his lip she'd divorce him and turn him loose to beg in the streets. He announced that she'd be doing him a favor, since marriage to her was uphill work at best.

The argument simmered down after a while, so that I could hear the roosters in the distance, yelling with insane glee in the dead dark middle of the night. I balled up the rest of my energy in my fist and knocked on the door.

Wilkinson answered it this time. He was a big man in his thirties who looked older. His Mexican clothes and haircut made him seem to be metamorphosing under my eyes, changing into something that was strange even to himself. He had alcohol in him, red in the eye, sour on the breath, thick on the tongue.

"I don't know you. Go 'way."

"Just give me a minute. I'm a private detective, and I flew down from L.A. to do some checking on Burke Damis. I heard you were a friend of his."

"You heard wrong. He came sucking around for free drinks. Once I caught onto him, I cut him dead. But dead."

Wilkinson had a nasty whining drawl. His red eyes glared with something stronger than drink, perhaps a touch of madness.

"What did you catch on to about Damis?"

"He wormed himself into my good graces so he could get next to my wife. I don't stand for that."

He made a sideways slicing gesture. The edge of his hand struck the doorframe. He put the edge of his hand in his mouth.

"I heard a rumor that he killed his own wife."

"That was no rumor. We were in San Francisco in the spring, and I saw it in the paper with these eyes—the dead woman's picture and all. It said that he shtrangled her. But we didn't know who he was when he came here worming his way. We didn't know till we saw the picture he painted."

"Was it a portrait of his wife?"

"Thass right. Helen reckonized her face, poor little woman. That snake-in-the-grass shtrangled her with his own hands."

Wilkinson made clutching motions, as though he was having a waking dream of strangling or being strangled. His wife called from somewhere out of sight: "Who is it, Bill? Who are you talking to?"

"Man from L.A. He says that he's a detective."

She ran the length of the living room to his side. "Don't talk to him."

"I'll talk to him if I like," he said with the look of a spoiled and sullen child. "I'll put the kibosh on Damis once and for all."

"You stay out of it."

"You were the one that got me into it. If you hadn't tried to blackmail him into—"

"Be quiet. You're a fool."

They faced each other in a rage that created a vacuum around them. He was twice as big as she was, and almost twice as young, but she held her anger better. Her taut and shining face was expressionless.

"Listen to me, Bill. This man was here an hour or so ago. I had to ask him to leave."

"Whaffor?"

"He made a pass at me." Her hooked fingers swept across her bosom.

His attention slopped heavily in my direction. "Izzat true?"

"Don't believe her."

"Now he's calling me a liar." Her white triangular face was at his shoulder. "Are you going to let him get away with it?"

He threw a wild fist at my head. I let it go by and hit him in the body. He sat down holding his belly with both hands. I shouldn't have hit him. He retched.

"Why you dirty lousy son," the woman said.

She picked her revolver off the table and fired it at me. The bullet tugged at a loose fold of Stacy's sweater, close to my side. I turned and ran.

chapter 13

IN THE MORNING, the sudden-morning, Stacy drove me to the airport. He wouldn't let me pay him for the service, or for the double hole in his sweater. He said it would make a conversation piece.

But he did ask me when I had the time to call a friend of his who managed a small hotel in Laguna Beach. I was to tell the man that Claude was doing all right, and there were no hard feelings.

I tottered on board the plane and slept most of the way to Los Angeles. We landed shortly after one o'clock. It was hot, hotter than it had been in Mexico. Smog lay over the city like the lid of a pressure cooker.

I immured myself in an outside phone booth and made several calls. Colonel Blackwell had had no word from Harriet since she drove off with Damis the day before yesterday. It was possible, he agreed, that they had gone to Tahoe. His lodge there was situated on the lake, on the Nevada side of State Line.

I cut his anxious questions short with a promise to come and see him at his house. Then I called Arnie Walters in Reno. He ran a detective agency which covered that end of Nevada.

Arnie's wife and partner answered the phone. Phyllis Walters had the official-sounding voice of an ex-policewoman, but it didn't quite hide her exuberant femininity.

"How are you, Lew? Where have you been keeping yourself?"

"All over the map. Last night, for instance, I spent a week in Mexico."

"You do get around. Arnie's out. Is it business or just social?"

"Urgent business. You'd better record this."

"All right. Go ahead."

I gave her a description of Harriet and Damis and asked to have them

looked for in the Tahoe and Reno area, with special attention to the Blackwell lodge and the wedding chapels. "If Arnie or one of his men runs into Damis, with or without the girl, I want Damis held."

"We can't detain him, you know that."

"You can make a citizen's arrest and turn him over to the nearest cop. He's a fugitive from a murder rap."

"Who did he murder?"

"His wife, apparently. I expect to get the details this afternoon. In the meantime Arnie should be warned that the man is dangerous."

"Will do."

"Good girl. I'll get back to you later, Phyllis."

I called the photographer with whom I'd left my film of Damis's painting. The slides were ready. Finally, I called the art critic Manny Meyer. He said he'd be home for the next hour, and he was willing to look at my exhibits. I picked up the slides in Santa Monica and drove up Wilshire to Westwood.

Manny lived in one of the big new apartment buildings on the hill. The windows of his front room overlooked the UCLA campus. It was the room of a man who loved art and not much besides. Dozens of books had overflowed from the bookshelves onto the furniture, including the closed top of the baby grand piano. The walls were literally paneled with nineteenth-century reproductions and contemporary originals. Entering the room was like stepping into the interior of Manny's head.

He was a small man in a rumpled seersucker suit. His eyes looked deceptively sleepy behind his glasses. They regarded me with quiet waiting patience, as if I was the raw material of art.

"Sit down, Lew."

He waved his hand at the encumbered chairs. I remained standing.

"You would like me to identify a style, is that the problem? It isn't always so easy. You know how many painters there are? I bet you I could find five hundred within a radius of a mile. A thousand, maybe." He smiled slightly. "All of them geniuses of the first water."

"This particular genius did a self-portrait, which ought to make it easier for you."

"If I have ever seen him."

I got the bamboo-framed sketch out of my straw bag and showed it to Manny. He held it in his hands, studying it with concentration, like a man peering into a mirror for traces of illness.

"I believe I *have* seen him. Let me look at the transparencies."

I slid them out of their envelope. He held them up to the window one at a time.

"Yes. I know him. He has his own style, though there has been some

change in it, perhaps some deterioration. That wouldn't be surprising." When he turned from the window his eyes were sorrowful.

"His name is Bruce Campion. I saw some of his work at a showing of young artists in San Francisco last year. I also met him briefly. I hear since then that he has come to grief, that he is wanted by the police, for murdering his wife. It was in the San Francisco papers. I'm surprised you didn't see it."

"I don't take the San Francisco papers."

"Perhaps you should. You could have saved yourself time and trouble." He gathered together the sketch and the slides and handed them back to me. "I suppose you're hot on his heels?"

"On the contrary, the trail is cold."

"I'm glad. Campion is a good painter."

"How good?"

"So good that I don't greatly care what he did to his wife," he said softly. "You live in a world of stark whites and blacks. My world is one of shadings, and the mechanism of punishment is anathema to me. 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth' is the law of a primitive tribe. If we practiced it to the letter we would all be eyeless and toothless. I hope he eludes you, and goes on painting."

"The danger is that he'll go on killing."

"I doubt it. According to my reading, murderers are the criminals least likely to repeat their offense. Now if you'll excuse me I have a show to cover."

Meyer's parting smile was gentle. He didn't believe in evil. His father had died in Buchenwald, and he didn't believe in evil.

chapter 14

I DROVE ACROSS to Sunset, and up the winding road to Blackwell's house in Bel Air. He opened the front door himself, brushing aside a little maid in uniform. His eyes moved on my face like a blind man's eyes trying to glean a ray of light.

"You've found out something?"

"The news is not good."

His hands came out and clutched both of my arms above the elbows. With the mindless automatism of St. Vitus's dance, he started to shake me. I pushed him away.

"Calm down and I'll tell you about it."

"How can you expect me to be calm? My daughter has been gone for forty-eight hours. I should have used force to stop them. I should have shot him dead at my feet—"

"That's nonsense," I said. "We need to talk. Can we go in and sit down?"

He blinked like a man waking up from troubled sleep. "Yes. Of course."

The drawing room he took me into was furnished with Empire pieces which gave it a museumlike atmosphere. Family portraits looked down their Blackwell noses from the walls. One of them, of an officer in the uniform of the War of 1812, had the weight and finish of a Gilbert Stuart.

Blackwell sat in an armchair under it, as if to call attention to the family resemblance. I parked myself uninvited on a red divan with a curved back, and gave him a brief rundown on my Mexican trip.

"I've put together certain facts I uncovered there with others that cropped up here and come to a definite conclusion about Damis. He's a

wanted man traveling under more than one alias. His real name is Bruce Campion, and he's wanted for murder."

Blackwell's jaw moved slackly. I could see the pale insides of his mouth. "What did you say?"

"Damis's real name is Campion. He's wanted in San Mateo County for strangling his wife last spring."

Blackwell's face looked like cracked plaster. Consciousness withdrew from his eyes, leaving them blank as glass. He slipped from the armchair onto his knees, then fell heavily sideways. His white hair spilled like a sheaf on the old rose carpet.

I went to the door and called the maid. She came trotting and skidding on the parquetry, her excited little breasts bobbing under her uniform. She let out a muffled scream when she saw the fallen man.

"Is he dead?"

"He fainted, honey. Bring some water, and a washcloth."

She was back in thirty seconds, half spilling a pan of water on the carpet. I sprinkled some of it on Blackwell's face and swabbed his long forehead. His eyes came open, recognized me, remembered what I had told him. He groaned, and tried to faint again.

I slapped him with the wet cloth. The little maid stood and watched me with wide blue eyes, as if I was committing lese majesty.

"What's your name?" I asked her.

"Letty."

"Where's Mrs. Blackwell, Letty?"

"She does hospital work one day a week. This is the day."

"You'd better try and get in touch with her."

"All right. Should I call the doctor, do you think?"

"He doesn't need a doctor unless he has a heart history."

"Heart history?" she repeated like a lip reader.

"Has he ever had a heart attack, or a stroke?"

Blackwell answered me himself, in a shamed voice: "I've never even fainted before." He sat up laboriously, resting his back against the chair. "I'm not as young as I am—as I was. What you told me came as a fearful shock."

"It doesn't mean that Harriet is dead, you know."

"Doesn't it? I must have jumped to that conclusion." He noticed the young maid standing over him. He smoothed his hair and tried to compose his face. "You may go now, Miss Flavin. Be good enough to take that pot of water with you. It's out of place in here."

"Yessir." She picked it up and marched out.

Blackwell levered himself into the chair. "We have to do something," he said unsteadily.

"I'm glad you feel that way. I've already alerted detectives in the Reno area. I think we should extend the search to the whole Southwest, if not the entire country. That will cost a good deal of money."

He extended his limp fingers. "It doesn't matter. Anything."

"It's time to bring in the police, too, give them all we know and build a fire under them. I suggest you start off by talking to Peter Colton."

"Yes. I'll do that." He rose shakily as if the weight of his years had fallen on him all at once. "Give me a minute. My mind isn't quite clear yet."

"Better get yourself a drink. In the meantime, I have an important call to make. May I use one of your phones?"

"There's one in Isobel's sitting room. You can be private there."

It was a small pleasant room whose French doors opened onto a private terrace. The furniture was well used, shabby rather than antique. It didn't match the nineteenth-century grandeur of the drawing room, and I guessed that Isobel Blackwell had saved it from some less opulent period of her life—a period on which she hadn't turned her back.

I sat at the plain oak desk, called the Hall of Justice in Redwood City, and asked the switchboard operator for Captain Royal. He was San Mateo County's homicide chief, and I had met him on an earlier case.

"What can I do for you?" he said, after a few preliminaries.

"I have some information about Bruce Campion, who is alleged to have strangled his wife last May in your bailiwick. Is that correct?"

"Correct. It happened the night of May fifth. What's your information?"

I heard the small click as Royal switched on his recording machine. There was a second click, that sounded like a receiver being lifted.

"I've been tracing Campion's movements," I said. "He flew from Los Angeles to Guadalajara on May twentieth."

"The airport police were supposed to be watching for him," Royal said impatiently.

"He used false papers and an alias—Quincy Ralph Simpson. Does that name mean anything to you?"

"It does. I found out yesterday that Simpson was icepicked in Citrus Junction two months ago. You telling me Campion did it?"

"The possibility suggests itself," I said. "He must have been carrying Simpson's identification when he crossed the border. Simpson was almost certainly dead by then."

"Is Campion still in Mexico?"

"No. He spent two months there under the name Burke Damis, in Ajijic on Lake Chapala, where he was eventually recognized as a wanted man. In the meantime he'd got a visiting American girl named Harriet

Blackwell to fall for him. Nine days ago the two of them flew back to Los Angeles. Campion used the Simpson alias again. Then he switched back to Damis, and spent a week as a guest in the Blackwell's beach house near Malibu. It's possible the Blackwell girl knows something about his past and is protecting him. Campion has her hypnotized, but she could hardly miss the change of names."

"Is she with him now?"

"I hope not. But she probably is. The two of them left her father's house forty-eight hours ago after a serious altercation which involved threats of shooting. They took off in her car, a new green Buick Special." I gave him the license number.

"Who did the threatening?"

"Her father, Mark Blackwell. He's only a retired Colonel but he has money, and I imagine he pulls weight in some circles. I'm calling from his house in Bel Air now."

"Is Blackwell your client?"

"Yes. My immediate job is to find the girl and get her out of danger. She should be easy to spot. She's a big blonde, short-haired, aged twenty-four, about six feet in her shoes, with a tall girl's stoop. Expensively dressed, good figure, but face a little disfigured by a bony protuberance over the eyes. It's a genetic defect—"

"What?"

"The bony eyebrows are a family trait. The old man has 'em, and all the ancestors. Harriet wears dark glasses part of the time. I assume you know what Campion looks like."

"I have him memorized," Royal said.

"Picture?"

"No picture. That's how he got across the border."

"I have one. I'll try to get a copy of it into your hands today. Now there's a possibility that Campion and the girl have doubled back toward Mexico. Nevada is another possibility. They were talking about getting married, and it's an easy state to get married in. They may be married now, or representing themselves as married."

"The girl must be crazy," Royal said, "if she knows what he did to his wife and still wants to marry him."

"I'm not suggesting she knows about the wife. He probably faked a story to explain the aliases, and she would be easily taken in. She's crazy in the sense that she's crazy about him. Also, she's in active revolt against her father. She's twenty-four, as I said, and he treats her as if she was four."

"Isn't twenty-four a little late for the big rebellion?"

"Harriet has been living under military occupation. She's a fugitive from injustice."

"So she takes up with a fugitive from justice. I've seen it happen before." Royal paused. "How much danger do you think she's in?"

"You'd know more about that than I do, Captain. It depends on Campion's motivation. Harriet's due to come into money on her twenty-fifth birthday, so if it's money he's after, she's safe for the next six months. Did Campion kill his wife for money?"

"There wasn't any money, so far as we know. We haven't been able to uncover any motive at all. Which means he could be off his rocker. A lot of these creeps who call themselves artists are nuts. He lived like a bum in a remodeled garage near Luna Bay, everything in one room." Royal's voice was scornful.

"Did he have a record of irrational behavior?"

"I wouldn't know. He has a record, period. A year's hard labor and a dishonorable discharge for assaulting an officer during the Korean War. That's all we've been able to dig up on him, but it shows a history of violence. Also he wasn't getting along with his wife. Put the two together, it's all you need in the way of motive."

"Tell me about the wife."

"That can wait, can't it, Archer? I want to get your info out on the wires."

"You could give me a quick rundown."

Royal said in a clipped, toneless voice: "Her name was Dolly Stone Campion, age about twenty, pretty little blonde, not so pretty when we found her. According to our info, Campion picked her up on the South Shore of Tahoe last summer, and married her in Reno in September. It must have been a marriage of inconvenience —Dolly was three months pregnant at the time. At least their child was born in March, six months after the wedding. Two months after that he knocked her off."

"Tahoe keeps cropping up," I said. "The Blackwells have a lodge there, and Q. R. Simpson spent some time at the lake in May, shortly before he was murdered."

"What was he doing there?"

"I have a hunch he was working on the Dolly Campion case. What happened to her baby, by the way?"

"Her mother took him. Look, Archer, this could go on all day, and I have work to do. A lot more work than I had before," he added wryly. "Will you be coming up this way?"

"As soon as I can make it."

Which wasn't soon. I made a second call to Arnie Walters's office in Reno. I wanted to pass the word on Campion and ask Arnie to add more

men to the search. He already had, Phyllis told me, because Campion and Harriet Blackwell had been seen in State Line the previous night. That was all so far.

I dropped the receiver into its cradle. When I picked it up, it felt appreciably heavier. I called the airport and made a reservation on the next flight to Reno. They were going to have to give me flying pay.

As I was getting up from the desk, I noticed a folded newspaper which lay on the back of it. "San Mateo Man," I spelled out upside down. I unfolded the paper.

It was yesterday's issue of the *Citrus Junction News-Beacon*. The full headline ran across the top of the page: "San Mateo Man Killed Here: Police Suspect Gang Murder." The story under it was poorly written and poorly printed, and it told me nothing I didn't already know.

I still had the paper in my hands when Blackwell came into the room. He looked like the ghost of one of his ancestors.

"What are you doing with that newspaper?"

"I was wondering how it got into your house."

"That's no concern of yours, I should think." He snatched it away from me and rolled it up small. "A number of things are no concern of yours. For example, I'm not paying out good money to have myself and my daughter slandered to policemen."

"I thought I heard somebody on another extension. Does everyone in your household eavesdrop on everyone else?"

"That's an insulting remark. I demand that you withdraw it."

Blackwell was shaking with another bout of uncontrollable anger. The rolled newspaper vibrated in his hand. He slapped his thigh with it, as if it was a swagger stick or a riding crop. He looked ready to strike me with it, and challenge me to a duel.

"I can't change facts, Colonel. If you don't like what you heard, you could have stopped listening."

"Are you telling me what to do in my own house?"

"It does sound like it, doesn't it?"

"Then get out of my house. Get out, do you hear?"

"They hear you in Tarzana. Don't you want your daughter found?"

"We'll find her without your help. You're fired."

"You've already had my help," I said. "You owe me three hundred and fifty dollars for time and expenses."

"I'll write you a check, now."

"You can stop payment on a check. I need cash."

I was playing for time in the faint hope that Blackwell would come to his senses, as he had once before. Though I couldn't knuckle under to

him, I was eager to hold on to the case. It was beginning to break, and a breaking case to a man in my trade is like a love affair you can't stay away from, even if it tears your heart out daily.

"I don't have that much in the house," he was saying. "I'd have to cash a check at the hotel."

"Do that. I'll wait here."

"Outside," he said in a monitory tone. "I don't want you prying around in here. You can wait in your car."

I went down the hall and out, with Blackwell making shooing motions at my kidneys. He backed his black Cadillac out of the garage and drove away down the hill. I put in a bad ten minutes deciding where to go from here. It would have to be Tahoe, though I hated to make the trip on my own time.

The mourning dove had returned to the television antenna. He sat there still and perfect as a heraldic bird. I said hoo-hoo to him and got a response, hoo-hoo, and I felt better.

Isobel Blackwell, driving a small foreign car, came into the driveway from the road. I got out of my car to meet her. Her face looked wan in the sunlight, but she made herself smile at me.

"Mr. Archer! What a pleasant surprise."

"Didn't Letty get in touch with you?"

"I left the hospital early. I've been concerned about Mark."

"You have some reason to be. He had a fainting spell a while ago. Then he had a yelling spell."

"Mark fainted?"

"I gave him some information that hit him hard."

She ducked out of her little car and thrust her face up toward mine. "Something has happened to Harriet."

"We don't know that. But something could happen to her any time. She's wandering around Nevada with the man who calls himself Damis. His actual name is Bruce Campion, and he's wanted in Redwood City for murdering his wife."

It took her a minute to absorb this. Then she turned toward the house and noticed the empty garage. "Where is Mark?"

"He went down to the hotel to get some money to pay me off. He fired me."

"What on earth for?"

"The Colonel and I have had it, I'm afraid. We've both had too much Army, in different ways—the worm's-eye view and the god's-eye view."

"But I don't understand. You mean you won't go on with him?"

"I'd have to be asked. Which isn't very likely."

"I know how difficult he can be," she said in a rush of feeling. "Tell me exactly what the trouble was."

"He listened in on a telephone conversation I had with a police officer. I made some critical remarks about his treatment of Harriet. He didn't like them."

"And that's all?"

"All there is on the surface. Of course he was thrown by the information I gave him on Damis-Campion. He couldn't handle it, so he threw it back. He thinks that I'm what hurts him."

She nodded. "That's his standard pattern. It's been getting worse since this began. I'm worried about him, Mr. Archer. I don't know how he's going to survive."

"It's Harriet's survival I'm worried about. She and Campion were seen at State Line last night, and I have some Reno detectives on their trail. We have a chance to take him and rescue her, if we can stay with it."

Her whole body reacted to my words. She clutched her handbag to her breast as if it was a child she could protect. "The man is a murderer, you say?"

"It's a matter of police record."

She moved closer to me. Her hand lit on my wrist, and she said in a voice as low as a mourning dove's: "You said you'd have to be asked. I'm asking you. Will you take me for a client?"

"Nothing would suit me better."

"Then it's a contract." Her hand slid from my wrist to my fingers, and squeezed them. "It would be a good idea to let me tell Mark about this. In my own time, in my own way."

"I agree."

She went into the house and came out and gave me money and went in again. Blackwell's Cadillac rolled into the drive. He climbed out and gave me money. His color was better, and I could smell fresh whisky on him. He must have had a quick one or two at the hotel.

He looked at me as though he wanted to speak, but he didn't say a word.

chapter 15

ARNIE WALTERS met me at the Reno airport. He was a short broad man in his early fifties who looked like somebody you'd see selling tips at a race track. But he had the qualities of a first-rate detective: honesty, imagination, curiosity, and a love of people. Ten or twelve years in Reno had left him poor and uncorrupted.

On the way to State Line he filled me in on the situation there. A handyman named Sholto, who kept an eye on several lakeside houses for their absentee owners, had talked to Harriet the night before. She had come to Sholto's house to get the key to her father's lodge, and specifically asked him not to tell her father she was there. Campion had been with her, but stayed in the car, her car.

"Apparently," Arnie went on, "they spent the night, or part of the night, in the lodge. There's some dirty dishes on the sinkboard, recently used. Also there's some indication they're coming back, or planned to. He left his suitcase in the entrance hall. I have the place staked out."

"What about her suitcase?"

"Gone. So is her car."

"I don't like that."

Arnie shifted his eyes from the road to my face. "You seriously think he brought her up here to do her in?"

"It's a possibility that can't be ruled out."

"What were the circumstances of the other killing? The wife."

"He strangled her. I don't have the details yet."

"Did he stand to gain by her death?"

"The San Mateo police think not. The only motive they've come up with is incompatibility, or words to that effect. Evidently it was a forced marriage: the girl was about three months pregnant at the time. He mar-

ried her in Reno last September, by the way, which means that this isn't new territory to Campion."

"You think he's repeating a pattern?"

"Something like that."

"What kind of a character is he?"

"He has me baffled."

"I never heard you say that before, Lew. Not out loud."

"Maybe I'm slipping. I don't pretend to be attuned to the artistic mind. Campion is a good painter, according to a critic who knows what he's talking about."

"You think he could be psycho? A lot of psychos magnetize the broads."

"The psycho broads," I said. "It's hard to tell about Campion. He had himself in control both times I saw him. The second time was under severe provocation. Harriet's father threatened him with a shotgun, and he stood up to it like a little man. But then psychos can be actors."

"Bad actors. Is he as good-looking as the description says?"

"Unfortunately yes. I brought along a picture of him. It's a self-sketch, not a photograph, but it's a good-enough likeness to circularize. I want it back after you have it photographed."

"Sure. Leave it in the car. I'll get it around to our informers and have it posted in the lookout galleries in the clubs. Sooner or later he'll show, if he's hiding out in this area. You realize he could be long gone by now, and so could the girl."

We drove in silence for a while, through country wooded with evergreens. The trees parted at one point, and I caught a first glimpse of the lake. It was the height of the season, and outboards were rioting in the afternoon sun. Skiers drove their plows of spray in eccentric furrows. I couldn't help remembering that Tahoe was deep and cold. Harriet could be long gone, far down, sheathed in black bottom water.

Her father's lodge stood among dense trees at the end of a frost-cracked asphalt lane. It was an imposing timbered building with half-walls of native stone. Concrete steps with iron railings zigzagged down from the terrace to the shore.

A man stepped out of the trees. He had the stubborn thick-bodied presence of an old cop. Arnie introduced him as Jim Hanna, one of his men. The three of us went inside.

Campion's brown suitcase was standing in the hallway under a moose head. I reached for it, but Arnie stopped me.

"It's a waste of time, Lew. Nothing in it but some painting equipment and shaving kit and some old clothes. He was hungry."

The great front room was furnished with handsome rustic pieces,

Navajo rugs, animal skins, animal heads staring down at us with sad glass eyes. The picture window that Harriet had described to Campion framed blue sky and blue lake. Her pitch had been too successful, I was thinking.

We went through the other rooms, including the six upstairs bedrooms. Their mattresses lay bare. A closet in the hallway was full of sheets and pillow slips and towels, none of which had been used.

I left Arnie and Hanna in the house and went down the concrete steps to the shore. The lake had been pulling at me since my first sight of it. It was very low this year, and a swath of gravel sloped down from the foot of the steps.

I took a walk along the edge of the gravel. Speedboat waves lapped at the stones and brightened them. I was looking for some trace of Harriet; yet I was shocked when I found it. It was something that looked like a scrap of grey fishnet tangled with some floating sticks about fifty feet offshore.

I stripped to my shorts behind a tree and went in after it. The lake was icy after the summer air. The thing in the nest of sticks did nothing to warm me. It was her hat, with its little veil fluttering in the sun.

I disentangled it and held it out of the water in my left hand as I sidestroked back to shore. There I discovered that the hat had more than the veil attached to it. In the damp silk lining there was a smear of coagulated blood about the size of a thumbnail. Adhering to this was a thin lock of hair about six inches long. It was fair and straight, like Harriet's, and it had been torn out by the roots.

I dressed and went up to the lodge on cold and heavy legs and showed the other men what I had found.

Arnie whistled softly, on a diminuendo. "Looks like we're too late."

"That remains to be proved. How good is the law around here?"

"Spotty. It's been improving, but there's six or seven different jurisdictions around the lake. It spreads the money thin, and also the responsibility."

"Can you bring the Reno P.D. in on this? It needs lab work."

"And a dragging operation. It's not their territory, but I'll see what I can do. You want to come back to town with me?"

"I should talk to Sholto. Does he live in this neighborhood?"

"A couple of miles from here, on the road to State Line. I'll drop you."

Sholto's boxlike little house stood in a clearing far back from the road. Chickens scratched around it. The young woman who answered the door had a baby on her hip and a slightly larger child hanging onto her skirt. She pushed back her hair and gave Arnie a wide slack smile.

"Hank is out back, Mr. Walters. He's building a hutch for the rabbits. Come through the house if you want."

A third child, a girl of eight or nine, was reading a comic book at the kitchen table, simultaneously drinking chocolate milk through a straw. Her bare toes were curled with concentrated pleasure. She regarded us blankly, as though we were less vivid than the characters in her book. I paid particular attention to the child because her towhead was the same color as Harriet's.

A boy of twelve or so was helping his father in the back yard. That is, he sat on a board laid across wooden horses while Sholto used a handsaw on the board. He was a wiry man of indeterminate age, hipless in faded blue levis. His sun wrinkles gave his jay-blue eyes a fiercely questioning look.

"Hi, Mr. Walters. You find her all right?"

"Not yet. This is my associate Lew Archer. He has some more questions to ask you."

Sholto laid down his saw and gave me a wide hard hand. "Shoot away."

"Before you men talk," Arnie said, "I want to show you a picture, Henry."

He produced the self-sketch of Campion which he had brought from the car. "Is this the man you saw with Harriet?"

"Sure looks like him. Something funny about the eyes, though. How come one of 'em is bigger than the other?"

"He drew it that way," I said.

"He drew this himself?"

"That's right."

"Why did he do that to the eyes? It makes him look cock-eyed. He's a real nice-lookin' fellow in real life."

Arnie lifted the picture from his hands. "Thanks, Henry. I needed a positive identification."

"Is the guy some kind of a crook?"

"He has a record," I said. "Maybe you'd better send the boy inside."

"I don't wanna go inside."

"Inside," Sholto said.

The boy climbed off his board and went. Arnie followed him into the house, with a curt flick of the hand to us. Sholto said to me: "I hope Miss Blackwell isn't in trouble. She's a nervous young lady, jumpy as a filly. She wouldn't take trouble too well."

"Was she nervous last night when you talked to her?"

He propped one foot up on a sawhorse and rested his arm on his knee. "I'd say she was. Mostly I think she was nervous on account of her father—

you know, the young fellow, and them using the lodge. But she had a perfect right—I told Mr. Walters that. And I told her I wouldn't breathe a word to the old man. After all, she's used it before when he wasn't here."

"With men?"

"I dunno about that. This is the first man she ever brought up here, leastways that I saw. What did the two of them have in mind?"

"They talked about getting married."

"Is that a fact?"

"You sound surprised."

"It's just that I never thought of her as the marrying type. I got a sister teaches school in Porterville, she's the same way. She's still living at home."

"Miss Blackwell isn't. How were the two of them getting along when you saw them?"

"I didn't see them together. She came up to the door by herself, wanting the key to the lodge. He stayed in the car." Sholto pushed back his cap and scratched his freckled hairline, as though to promote the growth of an idea. "They did sit out in the car for quite a while after. The wife thought they were having an argument."

"Did you hear any of it?"

"I didn't like to listen," he said delicately. "Besides, I had the radio on."

"Did your wife hear any of it?"

"She must of, or how would she know it was an argument?" He raised his voice: "Molly!"

The woman appeared at the back door with the baby on her hip. From the cover of her other hip, the twelve-year-old peered out resentfully.

"What is it, Hank?"

"Last night, when Miss Blackwell came for the key, and they were sitting out in the car after—did you hear anything they said?"

"Yeah. I told you they were having a battle."

I moved to the foot of the back steps. "Did he hit her?"

"Not that I saw. It was just talk. She didn't want to go to the lodge. He did."

"*She* didn't want to go?"

"That's what she said. She said he was trying to use her or something, said he was taking advantage of her love. He said he wasn't. He said that he was working out his des—destry?"

"Destiny?"

"Yeah, destiny. He said he was working out his destiny or something. I dunno what he meant when he said that. They were talkin' pretty high-falutin'."

"How did his voice sound? Was he excited?"

"Naw, he was real cool and cold. She was more hysterical like."

"Did he threaten her, Mrs. Sholto?"

"I wouldn't say he threatened her. More like he soothed her down. She was okay when they drove off."

"Who was driving?"

"He was. She was at the wheel when they were sitting there, but he changed places with her. He did the driving."

"What time did they leave?"

"I dunno. The clock broke. When are you going to get me a new clock, Hank?"

"Saturday."

"I bet," she said serenely, and retreated into the house.

Sholto turned to me. "It was twilight when they left here, nearly night, I'd say around eight o'clock. I didn't know there was nothin' wrong or I'd of phoned her father. You think the guy did something to her, eh?"

"We have some evidence that points that way. Was Miss Blackwell wearing a hat when you saw her last night?"

"Yeah, a little hat with a veil. I noticed it because the girls don't go in for hats around here much."

"I found her hat in the lake just now," I said. "With blood and hair on it."

His eyes went almost out of sight in their twin nests of wrinkles.

"The man she was with, Campion, is implicated in two other murders. One was his wife. Her maiden name was Dolly Stone, and she's supposed to have spent some time here last summer. Did you ever hear of a Dolly Stone, or Dolly Campion?"

"No, sir. No siree."

"What about Q. R. Simpson?"

"Come again."

"Quincy Ralph Simpson. His wife told me he was up here a couple of months ago."

"Yeah," he said matter-of-factly, "I knew Ralph. He worked for the Blackwells for a little while, in May I think it was. The Colonel opened the lodge early this year, in April. He told me he wanted to give his new little wife a chance to watch the spring come on." He paused, and glanced at the declining sun as though to reorient himself in the present day. "Did something happen to Ralph Simpson?"

"He's the other murder victim. We don't know for certain that Campion was responsible. The chances are he was. What sort of work was Simpson doing for the Blackwells?"

"Chief cook and bottlewasher, while he lasted. He didn't last long."

"Why not?"

Sholto kicked at one of the sawhorses. "I don't like to pass it on about a dead man. There was talk around that Ralph took something. I didn't put much stock in it myself. Ralph may have been a gamblin' fool, but that don't make him no thief."

"He was a gambler?"

"Yeah, he can't stay away from the tables. It was my belief he gambled away his money and got stuck here and had to take any job he could get. He must of had some reason for hiring himself out for a cook—a young fellow with his brains. Now you tell me he's dead," he said with some resentment.

"Did you know him well, Mr. Sholto?"

"We shot the breeze a couple of times when I was doing repair work at the lodge. The kitchen linoleum buckled, and I had to piece it. Ralph Simpson was a likable fellow, full of ideas."

"What kind of ideas?"

"All kinds. Man in space, the atom bomb, he had an opinion on everything. Reincarnation and the hereafter. He had a great understanding. Also, he had a system to beat the tables, for which he was trying to raise the capital."

"How?"

"He didn't say."

"What is he supposed to have stolen from the Blackwells?"

"I dunno. I never got it straight."

"Who did you hear it from?"

"Kito. He's houseboy in one of the other lodges. But you can't always trust these Orientals."

"Still I'd like to talk to Kito."

"He isn't around any more. The family closed the place up last month and went back to Frisco."

"Do you know their address in Frisco?"

"I have it written down in the house."

"Get it for me, will you?"

He went in and came out with a Belvedere address written in childish longhand on the back of an envelope. I transcribed it in my notebook.

"Is there anything else you can tell me about Simpson?"

"I can't think of anything."

"Or anyone else who can?"

"Well, he did have a girl friend. It wouldn't be fair to pass that on to his wife. Matter of fact, he never mentioned a wife. I thought he was a single man."

"It hardly matters now," I said, with my ball-point poised over the open notebook. "What's the girl friend's name?"

"He called her Fawn. I don't rightly know her last name. I saw her a couple of times in the clubs with Ralph, and once or twice since." He added, with a rueful glance at the house: "I don't go there to gamble. I can't afford to gamble, with my family. But I like to stand around and watch the excitement."

"Can you describe the girl?"

"She's a pretty little thing. She looks something like a real fawn—she has those big brown eyes."

"What color hair?"

"Light blonde, palomino color."

That didn't make it easier. Palomino fillies browsed in herds on the Tahoe shores.

"You say she's little?"

"Yeah, about five foot two or three." He held out a hand at shoulder level. "I call that little in a woman."

"What does she do for a living?"

"I dunno where she works, or if she works. She may not even be here any more. We have a floating population. They drift in and out. I been here for years myself, come here from Porterville when State Line was nothin' more than a wide place in the road."

"When did you last see Fawn?"

"A couple weeks ago, I *think* it was at the Solitaire. She had some older fellow on the string and they were playing the machines, leastways *she* was. He kept buying silver dollars for her. Yeah, I'm pretty certain it was the Solitaire."

chapter 16

SHOLTO DEPOSITED ME in front of the club and bumped away in his pickup. The main street of State Line was an unstable blend of small-time frontier settlement and big-time carnival. The lake seemed artificial seen from here: a man-made lake dyed a special shade of blue and surrounded by papier-mâché mountains. In this setting it was hard to believe in death, and life itself was denatured.

I went inside the club, where the late afternoon crowd were enjoying themselves, if gamblers can be said to enjoy themselves. They wheedled cards or dice like sinners praying to heaven for one small mercy. They pulled convulsively at the handles of one-armed bandits, as if the machines were computers that would answer all their questions. Am I getting old? Have I failed? Am I immature? Does she love me? Why does he hate me? Hit me, jackpot, flood me with life and liberty and happiness.

A number of men and a few women were hanging around the bar. I waited my turn with one of the overworked bartenders and asked him where the security officer was.

"I saw Mr. Todd on the floor a minute ago." He scanned the big room. "There he is, talking to the character in the hat."

I made my way down one of the aisles of slot machines. Todd was an athletic-looking man in an open-necked shirt. He had iron-grey hair, iron-grey eyes, a face that had been humanized by punishment. The other man, who wore a white Stetson with a rolled brim, was drunk and fat and furious. He had been robbed, the machines were fixed, he'd see the management, invoke his influence with the governor.

With gentle firmness Todd steered him to the front door. I stepped out after Todd, away from the din of the gamblers, and showed him my photostat. He smiled as he handed it back.

"I used to be with the California Highway Patrol Looking for some body?"

"Several people." I gave him full descriptions of Campion and Harriet.

"I don't believe I've seen 'em, at least not together. I can't be certain. The turnover in this place is something for the book. Sometimes I think it's the bottleneck where the whole country passes through sooner or later." His eyes were on the drunk, who was weaving across the street through light traffic.

"Try something easier," I said. "A girl named Fawn something. She's a small girl with beautiful brown eyes, I'm told, pale blonde hair. Fawn has been seen in your place."

Todd said with more interest: "What do you want with her?"

"I have some questions to ask her. She knew a man who was murdered in California."

"She involved?"

"I have no reason to think so."

"That's good. She's a nice kid."

"You know her, do you?"

"Sure. She's in and out. Her last name's King, I think, if she hasn't remarried."

"Has she been in today?"

"Not yet. She probably sleeps in the daytime."

"Where?"

"I don't know her that well. She used to work in the beauty parlor down the street. Try there. You'll see it on the left a couple of blocks from here."

He pointed west toward California. I went that way, past gambling houses that resembled supermarkets with nothing to sell. The first effects of night were coming on. Though everything was clearly visible, the fronts of the buildings were stark in their nakedness, as if the light had lost its supportive quality.

Marie's Salon de Paris was closed. I knocked on the glass door. After a while a large woman emerged from a room at the back and minced toward me through the twilit shop.

She turned on a light before she opened the door. Her hair was the color of a spectacular sunset, and she wore it low on her forehead in curled bangs, a dubious advertisement for her trade. Warm air smelling of chemicals and women drifted out past her.

"I'm looking for a woman named Fawn King."

"You're not the first. I hope you'll be the last. Mrs. King doesn't work here any more."

"Where can I put my hands on her?"

It was a bad choice of expression. Her pouched eyes went over me coldly, including my hands. I tried again: "I happen to be a detective—"

"She in trouble?" Marie said hopefully.

"A friend of hers is in the worst kind of trouble. He's dead. Stabbed with an icepick."

She brightened up alarmingly. "Why didn't you say so? Come in. I'll get you King's address."

Fawn lived in an apartment house a mile or so west on the same road. I started to walk, but on the way I noticed a U-drive sign at a gas station. I rented a new-looking Ford that sounded elderly. The attendant said it was the altitude.

The apartment house had a temporary atmosphere, like a motel. It was U-shaped and two-storied. The U enclosed the tenants' parking lot, with its open end facing the street. I drove in and left the Ford in one of the white-marked slots.

Fawn's apartment was number twenty-seven on the second floor. I went up the outside steps and along the railed gallery till I found her door. There was music behind it, the sound of a woman singing a blues. It wasn't quite good enough to be a record, and there was no accompaniment.

The song broke off when I knocked. She appeared at the door, her face still softened by music. Her brown eyes held a puzzled innocence. Perhaps she was puzzled by her body and its uses. It was full and tender under her sweater, like fruit that has ripened too quickly. She held it for me to look at and said in a semiprofessional voice: "Hello. I was just practicing my blues style."

"I heard. You have a nice voice."

"So they all tell me. The trouble is, the competition here is terrif. They bring in recording stars, and it isn't fair to the local talent."

"You're a local girl?"

"This is my third season. My third fabulous season. Which makes me an old-timer."

"And you want to be a singer?"

"Anything," she said. "Anything to get out of the rat race. Do you have any suggestions?"

My usual line was ready, the one I used on aspiring starlets and fledgling nightingales and girls who hoped to model their way into heaven: I was from Hollywood, knew movie people, could help. Her puzzled innocence stopped me.

"Just keep trying."

She regarded me suspiciously, as though I had flubbed my cue. "Did somebody send you?"

"Ralph Simpson."

"What do you know? I haven't heard from Ralph for it must be at least two months." She stepped aside in a quick dancer's movement. "Come in, tell me about him."

It was a hot-plate apartment containing a studio bed that hadn't been made, an open portable record player, a dressing table loaded with cosmetic jars and bottles and a few paperbacked novels with young women like Fawn portrayed on their covers. The calendar on the wall hadn't been changed since April.

I sat on the studio bed. "When did you last hear from Ralph?"

"Couple of months, like I said. He spent the night with me," she went on routinely, "it must of been sometime around the middle of May. That was when he lost his job and didn't have no place—any place to go. I lent him bus fare in the morning, haven't seen him since."

"He must be a good friend of yours."

"Not in the way you think. It's a brother-and-sister act between Ralph and me. We batted around together ever since we were kids in South San Francisco. He was like a big brother to me. Anyway, I wouldn't take a married man away from his wife."

But she posed in front of me as if she was testing out her power to do this.

"I'm not married," I said.

"I was wondering." She sat on the bed beside me, so close I could feel her heat. "You don't talk like a married man and you don't look like a bachelor."

"I had a wife at one time. She looked something like you."

"What was her name?"

"I forget." There was too much pain in the word, and this was no place to deposit it.

"I don't believe you. What happened to your wife?" Her brown eyes were attentive on my face. You'd have thought I was about to tell her fortune.

"Nothing had happened to her. She left me, but that wasn't bad for her. It was bad for me. Eventually she married somebody else and had some kids and lived happily ever after."

She nodded, as if the story's happy ending might somehow apply to her. "She left you on account of another woman, I bet."

"You'd lose your bet. I treated her badly, but not in that way." The pain stirred like a Santa Ana wind in the desert back reaches of my mind. I'd begun to talk to the girl because she was there. Now I was there, too, more completely than I wanted to be. "Also," I said, "she didn't like my trade. At the moment I'm not too crazy about it myself."

"I wouldn't care what a man did for a living. My ex was just a bookie, but I didn't care. What do you do for a living?"

"I'm a detective."

"How interesting." But her body tensed, and her eyes glazed with distrust.

"Relax," I said. "If I was the kind of detective you're afraid of, I wouldn't be telling you about it, would I?"

"I'm not afraid."

"Good. You have no reason. I'm a private detective from Los Angeles."

"Ralph is interested in that kind of work, too. Is that how you know him?"

"In a way. Let's talk about Ralph. Can you tell me anything about that job he lost?"

"He was a houseboy, more or less. He took jobs like that when he couldn't get anything else. He worked for a mucky-muck up the lake. He showed me the house one night when the family was out. It was quite a layout."

"I've seen the Blackwell place."

"Blackwell. That was the name."

"How long did Ralph work for the Blackwells?"

"A week or so. I didn't keep tabs on him." She smiled in her puzzled way. "I have enough trouble keeping tabs on myself."

"Why did they fire him?"

"He didn't tell *me* he was fired. He said he quit because he had what he wanted. Anyway, the family was going back down south."

"I don't understand."

"They closed the lodge and went back to L.A. or wherever they live. Ralph thought they were going to stay longer, but they changed their minds."

"I mean I don't understand about Ralph getting what he wanted."

"Neither do I. You know Ralph, he likes to act mysterious. Ralph Simpson, boy detective. It's kind of cute."

"Was Ralph doing some sort of detective work at the Blackwell place?"

"So he said. I don't always buy a hundred per cent of what Ralph says. He goes to a lot of movies and sometimes he gets them mixed up with the things he does himself." She added, with an indulgent glance at the paperbacks on the dressing table: "I do the same thing with stories sometimes. It makes life more exciting."

I brought her back to the subject: "Tell me what Ralph said."

"I couldn't—my memory isn't that good. The way he talked, it was all mixed up with the tragedy that happened to Dolly. That hit Ralph hard. He was very fond of Dolly."

"Are you talking about the Dolly who married Bruce Campion?"

The force of the question pushed her off the bed away from me. She went to the far side of the room, which wasn't very far, and stood beside the dressing table in a defensive posture.

"You don't have to shout at a girl. I have neighbors, remember. The management's always breathing down my back."

"I'm sorry, Fawn. The question is important."

"I bet you're working on Dolly's murder, aren't you?"

"Yes. Was Ralph?"

"I guess he thought he was. But Ralph is no great operator. It's time somebody with something on the ball did something. Dolly was a sweet kid. She didn't deserve to die."

She looked up at the low ceiling, as if Dolly's epitaph was also a prayer for herself. Tentatively, almost unconsciously, she drifted back across the room, stood over me with eyes like brimming pools.

"It's a terrible world."

"There are terrible people in it, anyway. Do you know Bruce Campion?"

"I wouldn't say I *know* him. Ralph took me out to their place once, when Dolly was living with him. *She* was crazy about him at that time. She followed him around like a little poodle."

"How did Campion treat her?"

"All right. Actually he didn't pay too much attention to her. I think he kept her around because he needed a model. He wanted me to model for him, too. I told him I hadn't sunk that low yet, to pose for dirty pictures."

"He painted dirty pictures?"

"It sounded like it to me. Dolly said he made her take her clothes off." Her nostrils flared with righteous indignation. "I only know one good reason a girl should uncover herself in front of a man."

"Why did Campion marry her if all he wanted was a model?"

"Oh, he wanted more. They always do. Anyway, he had to marry her. He got her pregnant."

"Did Dolly tell you this?"

"She didn't have to tell me. I could see it already when Ralph and I were out there."

"Do you remember when that was?"

"It was along toward the end of last summer, late August or early September. They weren't married yet, but they were talking about it, at least she was. Ralph brought along a bottle, and we drank a toast to their happiness. It didn't do much good, did it? She's dead, and he's on the run." She touched my shoulder. "Did he really kill her?"

"All the evidence seems to point to him."

"Ralph said that isn't so. He said there was other evidence, but the cops held back on it. He may have been telling the truth, or having one of his movie spells. You never can tell about Ralph, 'specially where one of his friends is concerned." She drew a deep breath.

"When did Ralph say these things to you?"

Using her hand on my shoulder as a pivot, she sat down beside me. "The last night he was here. We sat up talking, after I got in."

"Did he tell you what the other evidence was?"

"No. He kept his lips buttoned. The man of mystery."

"Did he show you anything?"

"No."

"What did he have with him when he left here?"

"Just the clothes that he stood up in. When he came up here he wasn't planning to stay, but then he got this job." She hesitated. "I almost forgot the bundle. He dropped this bundle off with me a day or two before his job folded. I wasn't supposed to open it, he said. I *felt* it, though. It felt like it had clothes in it."

"What kind of clothes?"

"I wouldn't know. It was a great big bundle." She opened her arms. "I tried to ask Ralph about it, but he wasn't talking."

"Was it stolen goods, do you think?"

She shook her head. "Of course not. Ralph's no thief."

"What sort of a man is he?"

"I thought you knew him."

"Not as well as you do."

She answered after a little thought: "I *like* Ralph. I don't want to criticize him. He has a lot of good ideas. The trouble is, he never follows through on them. He keeps changing, because he can't make up his mind what he wants to be. I can remember, when we were kids, Ralph was always talking about how he was going to be a big criminal lawyer. But then he never even made it through high school. It's been like that all his life."

"How long has he known Campion?"

"It goes 'way back," she said. "Ten years or more. I think they were Army buddies in Korea. They did some talking about Korea the day Ralph took me out to the cabin."

"I'm interested in that cabin. Do you think you could find it again?"

"Now?"

"Now."

She looked at the leatherette-covered traveling clock on the dressing table. "I have a date. He's due here any time."

"Stand him up."

"I got rent to pay, mister. Anyway, you won't find Bruce Campion

there. He only had the cabin for a while last summer. Somebody lent him the use of it."

"I still want to see it."

"Tomorrow. Buy me brunch tomorrow, and I'll show you where it is. It's real wild on that side of the lake. Buy some sandwiches and we'll have a picnic."

"I like night picnics."

"But I have a date."

"How much do you expect to make out of him?"

She frowned. "I don't think of it that way. They give me money to gamble, that's their business. Nobody says I have to throw it all away."

"I'm asking you how much a couple of hours of your time is worth."

She blinked her innocent eyes. "Twenty?" she said. "And dinner?"

We set out in the rented Ford, along a road which branched north off the highway through thickening timber. Above the broken dark lines of the trees there were almost as many stars as I had seen in Mexico. The night was turning colder, and the girl moved over against me.

"Turn on the heater, will you, mister? I don't even know your name."

"Lew Archer." I switched on the blower.

"That's a nice name. Is it your real one?"

"Naturally not. My real name is Natty Bumpo."

"You're kidding me."

"It's a free country."

"Is there any such person as Natty What'shisname?"

"Bumpo. He's a character in a book. He was a great rifleman and a great tracker."

"Are you?"

"I can shoot a rifle but as for tracking, I do my best work in cities."

"Tracking men?"

"Tracking men."

She huddled closer. "Do you have a gun?"

"Several, but not with me. I wish I had."

"Do you think that Campion is hiding out in the cabin?"

"He may be, and he may be dangerous."

She giggled nervously. "You're trying to scare me. I thought he was kind of a sissy, with that little beret he wears, and all his arty talk."

"He's no sissy. He's something more complicated than that."

"How do you mean?"

"It's time I told you, Fawn. Dolly isn't the only one who was killed. Ralph Simpson was icepicked last May, soon after you saw him last. Campion is the prime suspect."

She had drawn in her breath sharply, and now she was holding it. I

could feel her body tighten against my flank. Her breath came out in gusts around her words.

"You must be mistaken. Maybe Bruce Campion did kill Dolly — you never can tell what a man will do to his wife. But he would never do anything like that to Ralph. Ralph idolized him, he thought he was the greatest."

"How did Campion feel about Ralph?"

"He *liked* him. They got along fine. Ralph was proud to have a real artist for a friend. It was one of the things he wanted to be himself."

"I've known a few artists. They can make difficult friends."

"But they don't stick icepicks in people." For the first time, the full meaning of what I had said struck the girl. I could feel it pass through her body, a shuddering aftershock. "Is Ralph really dead?"

"I saw him in the morgue. I'm sorry, Fawn."

"Poor Ralph. Now he'll never make it."

We rode in silence for a time. She began to cry, almost in-audibly. At one point she said to the moving darkness: "All my friends are dying off. I feel like an old woman."

I had starred glimpses of the lake between the trees, like polished steel catching the droppings of infinity.

I said when her grief had subsided: "Tell me more about Dolly."

"What's to tell?" Her voice was hoarse. "She came up here last spring to get a job. She made change at one of the clubs for a while, but her subtraction wasn't too hot, so she got herself a man. It's the same old story."

"This time the ending was different. Did you know her well?"

"There wasn't much to know. She was just a country girl from the sticks. I sort of befriended her when she lost her job. Then Ralph introduced her to Campion, and that was that."

"You said Ralph had a crush on her."

"I wouldn't put it that strong. Dolly was a beautiful kid, but he never made a play for her. He just wanted to look after her. She was pretty helpless. She didn't belong up here."

"Where did she belong?"

"Let's see, she told me once where she came from. It was some place down in the orange belt. She used to talk about the orange blossoms."

"Citrus Junction?"

"Yeah. How did you know?"

"Ralph was murdered in Citrus Junction."

chapter 17

THE CABIN STOOD on a wooded point which projected into the lake below the road. I left the car at the top of the lane and told Fawn to stay in it, out of sight. She crouched down in the front seat, peering like a frightened bush-bunny over the edge of the door.

I made my way down the rutted dirt lane, walking quietly, like Natty Bumpo. Starshine filtering down between the black conifers hung in the air like the ghost of light. A ramp of solider light slanted from the window of the cabin.

I approached it from the side and looked in. A man who wasn't Campion was standing in front of the stone fireplace, in which a low fire burned. He was talking to somebody or something.

"Eat it up, Angelo. Enjoy yourself. We've got to keep your weight up, old boy."

Unless there was someone in the shadowed bunks against the far wall, he seemed to be alone in the room. He was a small man with a dark head and a thin neck like a boy's. He wore a plaid shirt under a sleeveless red vest.

I saw when he moved that he was holding a young hawk, perched on the knuckles of his gauntleted left hand. The brown bird was tearing with its beak at something red held between the man's thumb and forefinger.

"Gorge yourself," he said indulgently. "Daddy wants you to be a big, healthy boy."

I waited until the bird had finished his red meal. Then I knocked on the door. The small man unlatched it and looked out curiously through rimless spectacles. The hawk's flecked golden eyes were impassive. I was just another human being.

"I'm sorry to trouble you," I said to both of them. "I was told a man named Bruce Campion lived here at one time."

His eyes hardened perceptibly behind the glasses. He said in a careful, cultivated voice: "That's true enough. Last summer before I went to Europe I lent Campion the use of my place. He spent August and part of September here, he told me. Then he got married and moved out."

"Do you know what happened to him after that?"

"No. I've been on my sabbatical, and rather completely out of touch with my friends in this country. I spent the entire year in Europe and the Near East."

"Campion is a friend of yours?"

"I admire his talent." He was weighing out his words. "I try to be useful to talent when I can."

"Have you seen Campion recently?"

The question seemed to disturb him. He looked sideways at the hawk perched on his upright fist, as if the bird might provide an answer or an augury. The bird sat unblinking, its great eyes bright and calm.

"I don't wish to be rude," the bird man said. "But I'd certainly feel more comfortable if I knew you had authority to ask me questions."

"I'm a private detective co-operating with several law-enforcement agencies." I gave him my name.

"Co-operating in what?"

"The investigation of a pair of murders, possibly three murders."

He swallowed and grew pale, as though he had swallowed the blood out of his face. "In that case, come in. Don't mind Michelangelo. He's completely indifferent to people."

But the hawk jumped straight up when I entered the room. Held by the leather jesses on its legs, it hung in the air for a moment beating its wings and fanning wind into my face. Then its master thrust his fist up, and the bird returned to its perch.

We sat facing each other with the bird between us.

"I'm Dr. Damis," he said. "Edmund B. Damis. I teach at Berkeley, in the art department." He seemed to be marshaling his professional defenses.

"Is that how you happen to know Campion?"

"I met him some years ago, in Chicago. I was a docent at the Art Institute while he was studying there. I admired his painting, as I said, and I've kept in touch with him. Or rather he has kept in touch with me."

It was a cold account. He was preserving his distance from Campion.

"He's a good painter, I've heard. Is he a good man?"

"I wouldn't care to pass judgment on him. He lives as he can. I took the easy way, myself."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"I teach for a living and do my painting, such as it is, on Sundays and on sabbaticals. Campion lives for his work. He cares for nothing else," he said with some feeling.

"You sound almost as though you envied him."

"I almost do."

"It may be a two-way envy, Dr. Damis. Is your middle name Burke, by any chance?"

"It is. My father was an admirer of Edmund Burke."

"Did you know that Campion's been using part of your name as an alias? He's been calling himself Burke Damis."

He flushed with displeasure. "Blast him, I wish he'd leave me and my things alone."

"Has he been at your things?"

"I mean this place. He left it like a pigsty when he moved out last fall. I had to spend most of the last week cleaning it up. Frankly, I've had enough of Bruce and his messy life and his *outré* relationships."

"Are you thinking of his relationships with women?"

"I was, yes. We won't go into them. I've long since given up trying to purge those Augean stables."

"I wish you would go into them."

"I prefer not to. They're excessively boring to me. They invariably follow the same sado-masochistic pattern. Bruce has always regarded women as his legitimate prey."

"Prey is quite a dramatic word. It reminds me of your hawk."

He nodded, as though I'd paid them both a subtle compliment. The hawk sat still as a figurine on his hand. It occurred to me that this Damis might be attached to Campion and the hawk in similar ways, watching through rimless spectacles as the two predators vaulted into space and took their pleasure.

"It brings up the fact," I went on, "that Campion's wife was strangled two months ago. Campion is wanted for the murder. Did you know that, Dr. Damis?"

"I most assuredly did not. I just flew in from Italy last week, and I came directly here." He was pale as bone now, and almost chattering. "I've been utterly out of touch with everyone and everything."

"But you've been in touch with Campion."

"How do you know that?"

"Call it intuition. You'd talk about him differently if you hadn't seen him for a year. Now when and where did you see him?"

"This morning," he said with his eyes on the floor. "Bruce came here this morning. He'd walked halfway around the lake during the night, and he looked perfectly ghastly."

"What did he come to you for?"

"Refuge, I suppose. He admitted that he was in trouble, but he didn't say what kind, and I swear he said nothing about his wife. He wanted to stay here with me. I didn't see that it was possible, or that I owed it to him. He's always been the taker and I've been the giver, as it is. Besides, I've reached a crucial stage in training my hawk." He smoothed the long feathers of its tail.

"When did he leave here?"

"Around noon. I gave him lunch. Naturally I had no idea that I was harboring a fugitive from justice."

"How did he leave?"

"He took my car," Damis said miserably.

"By force?"

"I wouldn't say that. He is bigger than I am, and more—forceful." He had dropped his pride, and he looked very young without it. "Bruce has an ascendancy over me. I suppose you're quite right, I've secretly envied his life, his success with women—"

"You can stop doing that now. Will you please describe your car make and model?"

"It's a 1959 Chevrolet convertible, red, with a checkered red and black top. California license number TKU 37964." As I was making a note of the number, he added: "Bruce promised I'd have it back within twenty-four hours. He knows I'm stuck out here without transportation."

"I imagine he couldn't care less. I'll see what I can do about getting it back for you. Do you want me to report it as a theft?"

"It wasn't a theft. I was a fool to do it, but I lent it to him voluntarily."

"Did he explain why he wanted the car, or where he was going with it?"

"No." He hesitated. "On second thought, he did give some indication of where he intended to go. He originally proposed that when he was finished with the convertible, he should leave it in Berkeley, in my garage. It certainly suggests that he was headed in that direction."

"And he was alone when he came here and when he left?"

"Oh yes, definitely."

"Did Campion say anything about the girl he'd been with?"

"He didn't mention a girl. As a matter of fact, he did very little talking. Who is she?"

"She is, or was, a tall blonde girl named Harriet Blackwell."

"I never heard of her, I'm afraid. Has something happened to her?"

"The indications are that she's in the lake."

He was shocked, and his feeling communicated itself to the bird on his fist. The hawk spread its wings. Damis calmed it with his hand before he spoke.

"You can't mean that Bruce drowned her?"

"Something like that. When he came here this morning, were there any signs that he'd been in a struggle? Scratch marks on his face, for instance?"

"Yes, his face *was* scratched. His clothes were in bad shape, too."

"Were they wet?"

"They looked as though they had been wet. He looked generally as though he'd had a rough night."

"He's in for rougher ones," I said. "Just in case he does come back this way, we'll want to station a man here. Is it all right with you?"

"I'd welcome it. I'm no more of a physical coward than the next person, but —" His apprehensive look completed the sentence.

"It's unlikely that he will come back," I told him reassuringly. "Assuming he doesn't, I'd like to have your ideas on where to look for him. Also, I want your Berkeley address, in case he follows through on his original plan."

"Couldn't we skip the Berkeley address? My mother lives there with me, and I don't wish her to be alarmed unnecessarily. I'm sure that she's in no danger from him."

"Does she know Campion?"

"Very slightly. Minimally. We had him to dinner, once, a couple of years ago. Mother didn't like him at all—she said he had a dark aura. At that time, though Mother didn't know it, he was living with some black-stockinged tramp in Sausalito. He'd previously lived in Carmel, Santa Barbara, San Diego, Los Angeles, and probably a number of other places. I wouldn't know where to start looking for him. Unless," he added after some thought, "he's gone to his sister."

"Campion has a sister?"

"He has, but it's far from likely that he's with her. She's a very stuffy Peninsula type, he told me. They don't get along."

"Where does she live on the Peninsula, and what's her name?"

"I'd have to look it up. I've never met the woman. I only happen to have her address because Campion used it as a mailing address when he was moving around."

Carrying the hawk with him, Damis went to a table in the corner of the room. He opened a drawer and got out a shabby brown leather address book. I stood beside him as he flipped the pages to the C's.

Bruce Campion was the first name on the page. Scribbled under and around it were addresses in the various cities Damis had mentioned. They were all scratched out except for a Menlo Park address—c/o Mrs. Thor Jurgensen, 401 Schoolhouse Road — which I made a note of.

"I used to think we were good friends," Damis was saying. His eyes

were fixed on the hawk, as though it was feeding him his lines by mental telepathy. "But over the years I caught on to the pattern of our relationship. I heard from Bruce only when he wanted something—a loan or a recommendation or the use of something I owned. I'm heartily sick of the man. I hope I never see him again."

I made no comment. He said to the hawk: "Are you hungry, Angelo? How about another sparrow wing?"

I left him communing with the silent bird and drove Fawn into State Line. We had *filets mignons*, carelessly served in one of the gambling clubs. The fat drunk in the white Stetson was balanced precariously on a stool at the bar. He seemed to have shifted gears under his load. His imperfectly focused eyes were watching the girls in the place, especially Fawn.

She had some wine with her meat, and it set her talking about Ralph again. He used to take her fishing at Luna Bay when she was in her early teens and he was in his late ones. Once he rescued her from the San Gregorio surf. Her memories had a dreamlike quality, and I began to wonder if she had dreamed them in the first place. But she ended by saying: "I can't take your twenty dollars. It's the least I can do for Ralph."

"You might as well take it—"

"No. There has to be something I won't do for money. I mean it."

"You're a good girl."

"He said as she lifted his wallet. The hustler with the heart of gold—cold and yellow."

"You're being hard on yourself, Fawn."

"And don't keep calling me Fawn. It isn't my name."

"What do you want me to call you?"

"Don't call me anything."

"Tell me your real name."

"I hate my real name." Her face was as blank as a wall.

"What is it, though?"

"Mabel," she said with disgust. "My parents had to give me the most unglamorous name in the world."

"Where are your parents, by the way?"

"I put them out for adoption."

"Before or after you changed your name to Fawn?"

"If you have to know," she said, "I changed my name the night King went AWOL on me and left me in this hole. The funny thing is, I'm getting sick of calling myself Fawn. I used to think it was glamorous, but now it just sounds like nothing. I'm getting ready to change my name again. Do you have any suggestions?"

"Not on the spur of the moment."

She leaned toward me, smiling intensely and nudging the edge of the table with her papillae. "Let's go to my place and have another drink and talk about it."

"Thanks, but I have work to do."

"It can wait, can't it? I stood up my date for you."

"Also, you're too young for me."

"I don't get it," she said with her puzzled frown. "You're not *old*."

"I'm getting older fast." I rose and laid some money on the table. "Do you want me to drop you anywhere?"

"I'll stay here. It's as good a place as any."

Before I reached the door, the drunk was moving in on her with his white Stetson in his hand and his bald head glowing.

chapter 18

I FOUND A telephone booth and called Arnie Walters's office in Reno. He answered the telephone himself.

"Walters here."

"This is Lew Archer. I have some information on Campion's movements. He's driving a red Chevvie convertible—"

"We know that." Arnie's voice was low and fast. "Campion's been seen in Saline City, talking to the key boy of one of the local motels. A patrol cop made him but he didn't pick him up right away. He wanted to check with our bulletin, and he had an idea that Campion was checking in. But when he got back to the motel, Campion had cleared out. This happened within the last couple of hours. Do you have later information?"

"You're 'way ahead of me. Did you get the name of the motel?"

"The Travelers, in Saline City. It's a town in the East Bay."

"What about Harriet?"

"Nothing so far. We're starting dragging operations in the morning. The police lab established that the blood in the hat is her type, B, but that doesn't mean much."

"How do you know her blood type?"

"I called her father," Arnie said. "He wanted to come up here, but I think I talked him out of it. If this case doesn't break pretty soon, he's going to blow a gasket."

"So am I."

By midnight I was in Saline City looking for the Travelers Motel. It was on the west side of town at the edge of the salt flats. Red neon outlined its stucco façade and failed to mask its shabbiness.

There was nobody in the cluttered little front office. I rang the hand-

bell on the registration desk. A kind of grey-haired youth came out of a back room with his shirttails flapping.

"Single?"

"I don't need a room. You may be able to give me some information."

"Is it about the murderer?"

"Yes. I understand you talked to him. What was the subject of conversation?"

He groaned, and stopped buttoning up his shirt. "I already told all this to the cops. You expect a man to stay up all night chewing the same cabbage?"

I gave him a five-dollar bill. He peered at it myopically and put it away. "Okay, if it's all that important. What you want to know?"

"Just what Campion said to you."

"Is that his name Campion? He said his name was Damis. He said he spent the night here a couple months ago, and he wanted me to look up the records to prove it."

"Was he actually here a couple of months ago?"

"Uh-huh. I remembered his face. I got a very good memory for faces." He tapped his low forehead lovingly. "'Course I couldn't say for sure what date it was until I looked up the old registration cards."

"You did that, did you?"

"Yeah, but it didn't do him no good. He took off while I was out back checking. The patrol car stopped by, the way it always does around eight o'clock, and it must of scared him off."

"I'd like to see that registration card."

"The cops took it with them. They said it was evidence."

"What was the date on it?"

"May five, I remember that much."

It was evidence. May the fifth was the night of Dolly Campion's death.

"You're sure the man who registered then was the same man you talked to tonight?"

"That's what the cops wanted to know. I couldn't be absotively certain, my eyes aren't that good. But he looked the same to me, and he talked the same. Maybe he was lying about it, though. He said his name was Damis, and it turns out that's a lie."

"He registered under the name Damis on the night of May the fifth, is that correct?"

"They both did."

"Both?"

"I didn't get to see the lady. She came in her own car after he registered for them. He said his wife was gonna do that, so I thought nothing of it. She took off in the morning, early, I guess."

"How do you remember all that, when you're not even certain it was the same man?"

"He sort of reminded me. But I remembered all right when he reminded me."

He was a stupid man. His eyes were glazed and solemn with stupidity. I said: "Do you have any independent recollections of the night of May the fifth?"

"The date was on the registration card."

"But he could have registered another night, and said that it was May the fifth? And the man who signed in on May fifth could have been another man?"

I realized that I was talking like a prosecutor trying to confuse a witness. My witness was thoroughly confused.

"I guess so," he said dejectedly.

"Did Campion tell you why he was so interested in pinning down the date?"

"He didn't say. He just said it was important."

"Did he give you money?"

"He didn't have to. I said I'd help him out. After all, he was a customer."

"But you'd only seen him once before?"

"That's right. On the night of May five." His voice was stubborn.

"What time did he check in that night?"

"I couldn't say. It wasn't too late."

"And he stayed all night?"

"I couldn't say. We don't keep watch on the guests." He yawned, so wide I could count his cavities.

"What's your name?" I said.

"Nelson Karp."

"My name is Archer, Nelson. Lew Archer. I'm a private detective, and I have to ask you to return the five dollars I gave you. I'm sorry. You're probably going to be a witness in a murder trial, and you'll want to be able to tell the court that nobody paid you money."

He took the bill out of his pocket and dropped it on the counter. "I might of known there was a catch to it."

"I said I was sorry."

"You and who else is sorry?"

"Anyway, the State pays witnesses."

I didn't say how little, and Nelson Karp cheered up.

"When Campion left here tonight, which way did he go?"

"'Crost San Mateo Bridge. I heard them say that."

"By 'them' you mean the cops?"

"Yeah. They did a lot of telephoning from here." He gestured toward the pay phone on the wall.

I stepped outside and looked across the flats, where piles of salt rose like ephemeral pyramids. The lights of the Peninsula winked blearily in the haze across the Bay. As the crow flies, or the hawk, I wasn't more than ten miles from Menlo Park.

I went back into the office and got some change from Karp and placed a toll call under the name John Smith to Campion's sister Mrs. Jurgensen. Her phone rang thirteen times, and then a man's voice answered.

"Hello."

"I have a person call for Mrs. Thor Jurgensen," the operator intoned.

"Mrs. Jurgensen isn't here. Can I take a message?"

"Do you wish to leave a message, sir?" the operator said to me.

I didn't. Campion knew my voice, as I knew his.

Shortly after one o'clock I parked in the three-hundred block of Schoolhouse Road in Menlo Park. I crossed into the next block on foot, examining the mailboxes for the Jurgensens' number. It was a broad and quiet street of large ranch-type houses shadowed by oaks that far predated them. Bay-shore was a murmur in the distance.

At this hour most of the houses were dark, but there was light in a back window of 401. I circled the house. My footsteps were muffled in the dew-wet grass. Crouching behind a plumbago bush, I peered through a matchstick bamboo blind into the lighted room.

It was a big country-style kitchen divided by a breakfast bar into cooking and living areas. A used-brick fireplace took up most of one wall. Campion was sleeping peacefully on a couch in front of the fireplace. A road map unfolded on his chest rose and fell with his breathing.

He had on the remains of his grey suit. There were dark stains on it, oil or mud or blood. His face was scratched, and charred with beard. His right arm dragged on the floor and he had a gun there at his fingertips, a medium-caliber nickel-plated revolver.

No doubt I should have called the police. But I wanted to take him myself.

A detached garage big enough for three cars stood at the rear of the property. I approached it through a flower garden and let myself in through the unlocked side door. One of the two cars inside had the outlines of a Chevrolet convertible.

It was Dr. Damis's car. I read his name on the steering post in the light of my pencil flash. The keys were in the ignition. I took them out and pocketed them.

I looked around for a weapon. There was a work bench at the rear of the garage, and attached to the wall above it was a pegboard hung with

tools. I had a choice of several hammers. I took down a light ball-peen hammer and hefted it. It would do.

I went back to the Chevrolet and stuck a matchbook between the horn and the steering wheel. It began to blow like Gabriel's horn. I moved to the open side door and flattened myself against the wall beside it, watching the back of the house. My ears were hurting. The enclosed space was filled with yelling decibels which threatened to crowd me out.

Campion came out of the house. He ran through the garden, floundering among camellias. The nickel-plated revolver gleamed in his hand. Before he reached the garage he stopped and looked all around him, as though he suspected a trick. But the pull of the horn was too strong for him. He had to silence it.

I ducked out of sight and saw his shadowy figure enter the doorway. I struck him on the back of the head with the hammer, not too hard and not too easily. He fell on his gun. I got it out from under him and dropped it in my jacket pocket. Then I unjammed the horn.

A man was swearing loudly in the next yard. I stepped outside and said: "Good evening."

He turned a flashlight on me. "What goes on? You're not Thor Jurgensen."

"No. Where are the Jurgensens?"

"They're spending the night in the City. I was wondering who was using their house."

He came up to the fence, a heavy-bodied man in silk pajamas, and looked me over closely. I smiled into the glare. I was feeling pretty good.

"A wanted man was using it. I'm a detective, and I just knocked him out."

"Evelyn's brother?"

"I guess so."

"Does Evelyn know he was here?"

"I doubt it."

"Poor Evelyn." His voice held that special blend of grief and glee which we reserve for other people's disasters. "Poor old Thor. I suppose this will be in the papers—"

I cut him short: "Call the Sheriff's office in Redwood City, will you? Tell them to send a car out."

He moved away, walking springily in his bare feet.

chapter 19

ROYAL AND I waited outside the hospital room while Campion returned to consciousness. It took him the better part of an hour. I had time to fill the Captain in on my activities, and Campion's.

Royal was unimpressed by my findings in Saline City. "He's trying to fake an alibi for his wife's murder."

"Or establish one. I think you should talk to the key boy Nelson Karp, and see if that registration card is genuine. It's in the hands of the Saline City police."

Royal said without much interest: "Alibis like that one come a dime a dozen and you know it. He could have checked in at this motel and even spent part of the night, then driven back to Luna Bay and done her in. It's only about thirty miles between the two places."

"Which makes it all the easier to check."

"Look," he said, "I've got other things on my mind. Take it up with Deputy Mungan if you like. He's in charge of the substation at Luna Bay, and he's been handling the evidential details."

I didn't pursue the argument. Royal was a good cop but like other good cops he had an inflexible mind, once it was made up. We sat in uneasy silence for a few minutes. Then a young resident wearing a white coat and a high-minded expression came out of Campion's room and announced that, in view of the importance of the case, his patient could be questioned.

Royal and I went in past the uniformed guard. It was an ordinary small hospital room, with the addition of heavy steel screening on the window. Campion's bed was slightly raised at the head. He lay still and watched us. His heavy eyes recognized each of us in turn, but he didn't speak. His head was bandaged, and the flesh around his eyes was turning purple. Scratches stood out on his pale cheeks.

I said: "Hello, Campion."

Royal said: "Long time no see, Bruce."

Campion said nothing. The turbanlike bandage on his head, the grimace of pain on his mouth, made him look a little like an Indian fakir lying on a bed of spikes.

Royal's shadow fell across him. "What did you do with Harriet Blackwell, Bruce?"

"I didn't do anything with her."

"She was last seen in your company."

"I can't help it."

"You can't help killing people, you mean?"

"I've never killed anyone."

"What about your little wife Dolly?"

"I didn't kill Dolly."

"Come on now, Bruce. We know different. You've had your little burst of freedom. This is the end of the trail. The end of the trail and the beginning of the trial." Royal grinned at his own bad joke. "Anything you say can be used against you, true, but I'm advising you to speak out now, tell us the whole thing freely. It'll be easier on you in the long run."

"Sure," Campion said. "They'll put a cushion on the chair in the gas chamber and perfume the cyanide."

Royal leaned over the bed, his wide shoulders blotting out Campion's face. "You know you're headed for the gas chamber, eh? So why not give me the full story, Bruce? I been waiting a long time to hear it. Just come clean about Dolly, and I'm your friend. I'll do what I can to save you from the green room."

"Don't do me any favors, cop. And get away from me. You have bad breath."

Royal's open hand jerked up. "Why, you dirty little bas—" He bit the word in two and backed away, with a sideways glance at me.

Campion said: "Go ahead and hit me. Hitting people is what you people are for. I've hated you people all my life. You sell out justice to the highest bidder and let the poor people take the gaff."

"Shut up, you." Royal was shouting. "You lie there crying about justice with women's blood on your hands."

Campion flapped his hands in front of his face. "I don't see any blood."

"That's right, you didn't shed any blood when you killed Dolly. You used a stocking around her neck. Her own stocking." Royal made a spitting noise. "What goes on in a mind like yours, Bruce? I'd like to know."

"You never will. You're too ignorant."

"I'm not too ignorant to know a psycho when I see one, fooling

around with paintboxes and living on women. Why don't you do a man's work?"

"Like vagging prostitutes and shaking them down?"

"Don't talk to me about prostitutes. I read a book about that whoring psycho French painter—the one that cut off his ear and committed suicide. How psycho can you get?"

Campion sat up in bed. "If you weren't so ignorant you'd speak of Van Gogh with respect. Incidentally, he wasn't a Frenchman. He was a Dutchman, and a great religious genius."

"And you're another? Is that what you're trying to say? You're a great religious genius who goes in for human sacrifice?"

"You're the one who puts people in the gas chamber."

"I'm the one, and that's where you're going."

I stepped between them, facing Royal. His face was congested with blood, and his eyes had an oily sheen. I'd never seen him out of control before. Campion had lain back and closed his eyes.

I opened them with a question: "How did the blood get on Harriet's hat?"

"What hat?"

"The hat I fished out of the lake today. What was it doing in the lake, and how did her blood and hair get on the lining?"

"You better ask *her*. It's her hat."

"You knew it was in the lake?"

"You just told me, and I know you wouldn't lie. Cops never lie."

"Change the record, boy. How did that hat get into the lake?"

"I said, why don't you ask her?"

"She isn't available. Where is she, Campion?"

"I wouldn't know. I have a suggestion, however."

"What is it?"

"Disappear. I'm a sick man. I need rest."

"The doctor says you're questionable."

"Not me. I'm incommunicado. It's my reputation that's questionable."

"Stop playing word games."

"Why? A man needs some amusement in the long night watches. Storm troopers make dull companions."

Hot blood rose in my face. I felt a growing solidarity with Royal.

"You don't show much concern for your fiancée."

"My what?"

"You were going to marry her, weren't you?"

"Was I?"

"Answer me."

"You already know all the answers. Cops always do."

"If you weren't going to marry her, why did you take her to Tahoe? Because the lake is deep?"

Campion looked up at me with a deathly boredom. Royal spoke behind me in a new quiet voice: "Mr. Archer deserves an answer, Bruce. He's gone to a lot of trouble to ask you that question."

"Mr. Archer can take a running jump in the lake."

"Is that what Harriet did," I said, "with a little help from you?"

"I don't know what she did. I never touched her."

"How did you get those marks on your face?"

One of his hands crawled up to his face. His fingers explored it like a blind man's fingers palpating a strange object.

"I was wandering around in the woods last night. I must have scratched myself on the bushes."

"This was after your trouble with Harriet?"

He nodded almost imperceptibly.

"What was the trouble about?"

He lay and looked at me. "What trouble?"

"You mentioned trouble with Harriet."

"You were the one who mentioned trouble," he said.

"But you agreed that trouble had occurred."

"You must have been hearing things."

"I saw you nod your head."

"I have a slight tremor. Please excuse it. It comes from being beaten half to death by storm troopers. Now why don't you go away?"

"We're not going away," Royal said at my shoulder. "You admitted you had trouble with the girl. You've taken the first step toward the truth. You might as well give us the rest of it and get it over with. How about it, Bruce?"

"Don't call me Bruce."

"Bruce is your name, isn't it?"

"Not to you. To my friends."

"What friends?" Royal said in bitter contempt.

"I have friends."

"Where are they? Under the ground?"

Campion turned his face away.

"Did Ralph Simpson call you Bruce?" I said.

"What?" he said to the wall.

"Did Ralph Simpson call you Bruce?"

"Yes, he did."

"You were friends?"

"Yes."

"Then why did you knock him off and steal his papers?"

His eyes rolled in my direction. "I didn't steal his papers."

"We found his birth certificate in your pocket," Royal said.

"Ralph lent it to me."

"The same night you stuck the icepick in him?"

Campion's mouth became rectangular. I could see the red tongue curled behind his teeth. He raised his voice and cried out. His eyes turned up, and their veined whites glared at us as he went on yelling inarticulately.

Royal and I exchanged shameful looks. For some reason we were feeling guilty, at least I was. When Campion stopped his noise and fell back onto the pillow, other noises could be heard in the corridor. A woman seemed to be arguing with more than one man.

Royal started for the door. It was flung open before he reached it. The woman who burst in resembled Campion, though she was older and softer and better cared for.

"What are you doing to my brother?"

"Nothing, ma'am," Royal said. "That is, we had some questions—"

"Have you been torturing him?"

"It's been more like the other way around."

She moved past him to the bed. "They've hurt you, Bruce."

Campion looked at her bleakly. "If I can stand it, you can. Go away."

"He's right, Mrs. Jurgensen," Royal said. "You shouldn't be in here, you know."

The guard spoke up from the doorway. "That's what I was trying to tell her, Captain. I didn't know if I should use physical force."

Royal shook his head curtly. A tall man came in past the guard. He had greying blond crewcut hair and a long face. His mouth was pinched as though he'd been sucking a lemon. He took the woman by the arm and tried to drag her away from the bed.

She resisted his efforts without looking at him. She was staring hungrily at her brother's face.

"Don't you want me to help you?"

"You were among the missing when I needed it. You know what you can do with it now. Get lost."

"You heard him, Evelyn," the tall man said. He had a faint Scandinavian accent, more a lack of timbre than an accent. "He wants no part of us. We want no part of him."

"But he's my brother."

"I *know* that, Evelyn. Do you want everyone in the Bay area to know it? Do you want young Thor to lose his fraternity connection? Do you want people pointing me out on Montgomery Street?"

"You hear your husband," Campion said. "Why don't you amscray, sister? Fold your tensions like the Arabs and silently steal away."

The resident doctor appeared with a nurse in tow. He cast a withering glance around the room.

"May I remind you this is a hospital, Captain. This man is your prisoner but also my patient. I gave you permission to question him on the understanding that it would be quiet and brief."

Royal started to say: "I'm not responsible—"

"I am. I want this room cleared immediately. That includes you, Captain."

"I'm not finished with my interrogation."

"It can wait till morning."

Royal dropped the issue. He had the trial to think of, and the use that Campion's defense could make of the doctor's testimony. He walked out. The rest of us went along.

Not entirely by accident, I met the Jurgensen couple in the parking lot. They pretended not to see me, but I planted myself between them and their Mercedes sedan and made a fast pitch to her.

"I'm a private detective working on this case and it's come to my attention that there are some holes in the case against your brother. I'd like very much to talk to you about it."

"Don't say a word, Evelyn," her husband said.

"If we could sit down and have an exchange of views, Mrs. Jurgensen—"

"Pay no attention, Evelyn. He's simply trying to pump you."

"Why don't you stay out of this?" I said. "He isn't your brother."

She turned to him. "I'm worried about him, Thor, and I'm ashamed. All these months we've pretended he didn't exist, that we had no connection—"

"We *have* no connection. We decided that between us and that's the way it's going to be."

"Why don't you let the lady do her own talking?" I said.

"There isn't going to be any talking. You get out of the way."

He took me by the shoulder and pushed me to one side. There was no point in hitting him. The Mercedes whisked them away to their half-acre earthly paradise.

I checked in at a Camino Real motel and went to sleep trying to think of some one thing I could do that would be absolutely right and final. I dreamed that Campion was innocent and I had to prove it by re-enacting the crimes with paper dolls that stuck to my fingers. Then I found Harriet's body in the lake. She had talon marks on her head.

I awoke in a cold sweat. The late night traffic whirred with a sound like wings along the highway.

chapter 20

I GOT UP into the sharp-edged uncertainties of morning and drove across the county to Luna Bay. Patrick Mungan, the deputy in charge there, was a man I knew and trusted. I hoped the trust was reciprocal.

When I entered the bare stucco substation, his broad face generated a smile which resembled sunlight on a cliff.

"I hear you've been doing our work for us, Lew."

"Somebody has to."

"Uh-huh. You look kind of bedraggled. I keep an electric razor here, in case you want to borrow it."

I rubbed my chin. It rasped. "Thanks, it can wait. Captain Royal tells me you handled the evidence in the Dolly Campion murder."

"What evidence there was. We didn't pick up too much. It wasn't there to be picked up."

Mungan had risen from his desk. He was a huge man who towered over me. It gave me the not unpleasant illusion of being small and fast, like a trained-down welterweight. He opened the swinging door at the end of the counter that divided the front office.

"Come on in and sit down. I'll send out for coffee."

"That can wait, too."

"Sure, but we might as well be comfortable while we talk." He summoned a young deputy from the back room and dispatched him for coffee. "What got you so involved in the Campion business?"

"Some Los Angeles people named Blackwell hired me to look into Campion's background. He'd picked up their daughter Harriet in Mexico and was romancing her, under an alias. Three days ago they ran away

together to Nevada, where she disappeared. The indications are that she's his second victim, or his third."

I told Mungan about the hat in the water, and about the dusty fate of Quincy Ralph Simpson. He listened earnestly, with the corners of his mouth drawn down like a bulldog's, and said when I'd done: "The Blackwell girl I don't know about. But I don't see any reason why Campion would stab Ralph Simpson. It may be true what he said about Simpson lending him his papers to use. They were friends. When the Campions moved here last fall, it was Simpson who found them a house. Call it a house, but I guess it was all they could afford. They had a tough winter."

"In what way?"

"Every way. They ran out of money. The wife was pregnant and he wasn't working, unless you call painting pictures work. They had to draw welfare money for a while. The county cut 'em off when they found out Campion was using some of it to buy paints. Ralph Simpson helped them out as much as he could. I heard when the baby was born in March, he was the one paid the doctor."

"That's interesting."

"Yeah. It crossed my mind at the time that maybe Simpson was the baby's father. I asked him if he was, after Dolly got killed. He denied it."

"It's still a possibility. Simpson was a friend of Dolly's before she knew Campion. I found out last night that Simpson was responsible for bringing them together in the first place. If Simpson got her pregnant and let Campion hold the bag, it would give Campion a motive for both killings. I realize that's very iffy reasoning."

"It is that."

"Have you had any clear indication that Campion wasn't the father?"

Mungan shook his ponderous head. "All the indications point the other way. Remember she was well along when he married her in September. A man doesn't do that for a woman unless he's the one."

"I admit it isn't usual. But Campion isn't a usual man."

"Thank the good Lord for that. If everybody was like him, the whole country would be headed for Hades in a hand-basket. A hand-painted handbasket." He laid his palm on the desk as if he was covering a hole card. "Personally I have my doubts that those two killings, Dolly and Simpson, are connected. I'm not saying they aren't connected. I'm only saying I have my doubts."

"They have to be connected, Pat. Simpson was killed within a couple of weeks of Dolly — a couple of weeks which he apparently spent investigating her death. Add to that the fact that he was found buried in her home town."

"Citrus Junction?"

I nodded.

"Maybe he went to see the baby," Mungan said thoughtfully. "The baby's in Citrus Junction, you know. Dolly's mother came and got him."

"You seem to like my idea after all."

"It's worth bearing in mind, I guess. If you're going down that way, you might drop in on Mrs. Stone and take a look at the little tyke. He's only about four months old, though, so I wouldn't count on his resembling anybody."

The young deputy came back with a hot carton in a paper bag. Mungan poured black coffee for the three of us. In response to unspoken signals, the young deputy carried his into the back room and closed the door. Mungan said over his paper cup: "What I meant a minute ago, I meant the two killings weren't connected the way you thought, by way of Campion. This isn't official thinking, so I'm asking you to keep it confidential, but there's some doubt in certain quarters that Campion killed Dolly."

"What quarters are you talking about?"

"These quarters," he said with a glance at the closed door. "Me personally. So did Ralph Simpson have his doubts. We talked about it. He knew that he was a suspect himself, but he insisted that Campion didn't do it. Simpson was the kind of fellow who sometimes talked without knowing what he was talking about. But now that he's dead, I give his opinion more weight."

I sipped my coffee and kept still while Mungan went on in his deliberate way: "Understand me, Lew, I'm not saying Bruce Campion didn't kill his wife. When a woman gets herself murdered, nine times out of ten it's the man in her life, her boy friend or her husband or her ex. We all know that. All I'm saying, and I probably shouldn't be saying it, we don't have firm evidence that Campion did it."

"Then why was he indicted?"

"He has his own stupidity to thank for that. He panicked and ran, and naturally it looked like consciousness of guilt to the powers that be. But we didn't have the evidence to convict him, or maybe even arraign him. After we held him twenty-four hours, I recommended his release without charges. The crazy son-of-a-gun took off that same night. The Grand Jury was sitting, and the D.A. rushed the case in to them and got an indictment. They never would have indicted if Campion hadn't run." Mungan added with careful honesty: "This is just my opinion, my unofficial opinion."

"What's Royal's unofficial opinion?"

"The Captain keeps his opinion to himself. He's bucking for Sheriff, and you don't get to be Sheriff by fighting the powers that be."

"And I suppose the D.A. is bucking for Governor or something."

"Something. Watch him make a circus out of this."

"You don't like circuses?"

"I like the kind with elephants."

He finished his coffee, crumpled the cup in his fist, and tossed it into the wastebasket. I did the same. It was a trivial action, but it seemed to me to mark a turning point in the case.

"Exactly what evidence do you have against Campion?"

Mungan made a face, as if he had swallowed and regurgitated a bitter pill. "It boils down to suspicion, and his lack of an alibi, and his runout. In addition to which, there's the purely negative evidence: there was no sign that the place had been broken into, or that Dolly had tried to get away from the killer. She was lying there on the floor in her nightgown, real peaceful like, with one of her own silk stockings knotted around her neck."

"In her bedroom?"

"The place has no bedroom. I'll show you a picture of the layout."

He went to his files in the back room and returned with several photographs in his hands. One was a close-up of a full-breasted young blonde woman whose face had been savagely caricatured by the internal pressure of her own blood. The stocking around her neck was almost hidden in her flesh.

In the other pictures, her place on the floor had been taken by a chalk outline of her figure. They showed from various angles a roughly finished interior containing an unmade bed, a battered-looking child's crib, a kitchen table and some chairs, a gas plate and a heater, a palette and some paints on a bench by the single large window. This window, actually the glazed door opening of the converted garage, had a triangular hole in a lower corner. Unframed canvases hung on the plasterboard walls, like other broken windows revealing a weirdly devastated outside world.

"How did the window get broken, Pat?"

"Ralph Simpson said that it had been broken for weeks. Campion just never got around to fixing it. He was too high and mighty, too busy throwing paint at the wall to see that the wife and child got proper care."

"You don't like him much."

"I think he's a bum. I also think he's got a fair shake coming to him."

Mungan tossed the pictures onto his desk. He took a button out of the pocket of his blouse and rolled it meditatively between his thumb and forefinger. It was a large brown button covered with woven leather, and it had a few brown threads attached to it. I'd seen a button like it in the last few days, I couldn't remember where.

"Apparently the baby slept in the same room."

"There's only the one room. They lived like shanty Irish," he said in the disapproving tone of a lace-curtain Irishman.

"What happened to the child on the night of the murder?"

"I was going to bring that up. It's one of the queer things about the case, and one reason we suspected Campion from the start. Somebody, presumably the killer, took the baby out of his crib and stashed him in a car that was parked by the next house down the road. The woman who lives there, a Negro woman name of Johnson, woke up before dawn and heard the baby crying in her car. She knew whose baby it was—her and Dolly were good neighbors—so naturally she took it over to the Campions'. That's how Dolly's body was discovered."

"Where was Campion that night, do you know?"

"He said he was gone all night, drinking until the bars closed, and then driving, all over hell and gone. It's the kind of story you can't prove or disprove. He couldn't or wouldn't name the bars, or the places he drove afterward. He said along toward dawn he went to sleep in his car in a cul-de-sac off Skyline. That wouldn't be inconsistent with him doing the murder. Anyway, we picked him up around nine o'clock in the morning, when he drove back to his place. There's no doubt he had been drinking. I could smell it on him."

"What time was his wife killed?"

"Between three and four A.M. The deputy Coroner was out there by eight, and he said she couldn't have been dead longer than four or five hours. He went by body temp and stomach contents, and the two factors checked each other out."

"How did he know when she'd eaten last?"

"Campion said they ate together at six the previous night. He brought in a couple of hamburgers—some diet for a nursing mother—and the carhop at the drive-in confirmed the time. Apparently he and Dolly had an argument over the food, so he took what money there was in the house and went and got himself plastered."

"What was the argument about?"

"Things in general, he said. They hadn't been getting along too well for months."

"He told you this?"

"Yeah. You'd think he was trying to make himself look bad."

"Did he say anything about another woman?"

"No. What's on your mind, Lew?"

"I think we can prove he was lying about what he did on the night of May the fifth. Have you talked to Royal this morning?"

"He phoned to tell me he had Campion. He wants me to go over to Redwood City and take a hand in the questioning."

"Has Campion admitted anything yet?"

"He's not talking at all. Royal's getting kind of frustrated."

"Did he say anything to you about the Travelers Motel in Saline City?"

"Not a word." Mungan gave me a questioning look.

"According to their night clerk, Nelson Karp, Campion spent the night of May fifth there with a woman. Or part of the night. They registered as Mr. and Mrs. Burke Damis, which is one of the aliases Campion has been using. The Saline City police lifted the registration card last night after Campion was seen there. He seems to have been trying to set up an alibi."

"A good one or a phony?"

"You can find that out quicker than I can."

Mungan stood up and looked down the rocky slopes of his face at me. "Whyn't you give me the word on it in the first place?"

"I gave the word to Royal last night. He wasn't interested. I thought I'd wait and see if you were."

"Well, I am. But if this is no phony, why did Campion hold it out until now?"

"Ask him."

"I think I will."

He dropped the leather button he had been playing with on his desk. It rolled onto the floor, and I picked it up.

"Is this part of the evidence, Pat?"

"I honestly don't know. The baby had it in his fist when Mrs. Johnson found him in her car. She didn't know where it came from. Neither did anybody else."

I was still trying to remember where I had seen a button or buttons like it. I dredged deep in my memory, but all that came up was the smell of the sea and the sound of it.

"May I have this button?"

"Nope. I read a story once about a button solving a murder, and I have a special feeling about this button."

"So have I."

"But I'm holding onto it." His smiling eyes narrowed on my face. "You sure you don't want to borrow the use of my razor before you go?"

"I guess I'd better."

He got the electric razor out of the bottom drawer of his desk. I took it into the washroom and shaved myself. All I uncovered was the same old trouble-prone face.

chapter 21

MUNGAN WAS GONE when I came out. I used his telephone to call Vicky Simpson's house. No answer. The young deputy in the back room told me that so far as he knew Vicky was still in Citrus Junction waiting for the authorities to release her husband's body. I turned in the U-drive car at the San Francisco airport, caught a jet to Los Angeles, picked up my own car at the airport there, and drove out through the wedding-smelling orange groves to Citrus Junction.

I went first to see the baby. His grandmother lived on the west side of town in the waste that the highway builders had created. It was mid-afternoon when I got there. Earth movers were working in the dust like tanks in a no man's land.

An overgrown pittasporum hedge shielded the house from the road. The universal dust had made its leaves as grey as aspen. The house was a two-story frame building which needed paint. Holes in the screen door had been repaired with string. I rattled it with my fist.

The woman who appeared behind the screen looked young to be a grandmother. The flouncy dress she wore, and her spike heels, were meant to emphasize her slender figure. She had a blue-eyed baby face to which the marks of time clung like an intricate spider web. She was blonder than the picture I'd seen of her daughter.

"Mrs. Stone?"

"I'm Mrs. Stone."

I told her my name and occupation. "May I come in and talk to you for a bit?"

"What about?"

"Your daughter Dolly and what happened to her. I know it must be a painful subject—"

"Painful subject is right. I don't see any sense in going over and over the same old ground. You people know who killed her as well as me. Instead of coming around torturing me, why don't you go and catch that man? He has to be some place."

"I took Campion last night, Mrs. Stone. He's being held in Redwood City."

A hungry eagerness deepened the lines in her face and aged her suddenly. "Has he confessed?"

"Not yet. We need more information. I'm comparatively new on the case, and I'd appreciate any help you can give me."

"Sure. Come in."

She unhooked the screen door and led me across a hallway into her living room. It was closely blinded, almost dark. Instead of raising a blind, she turned on a standing lamp.

"Excuse the dust on everything. It's hard to keep a decent house with that road work going on. Stone thought we should sell, but we found out we couldn't get our money out of it. The lucky ones were the people across the way that got condemned by the State. But they're not widening on this side."

An undersong of protest ran through everything she said, and she had reason. Grey dust rimed the furniture; even without it the furniture would have been shabby. I sat on a prolapsed chair and watched her arrange herself on the chesterfield. She had the faintly anachronistic airs of a woman who had been good-looking but had found no place to use her looks except the mirror.

At the moment I was the mirror, and she smiled into me intensively. "What do you want me to tell you?"

"We'll start with your son-in-law. Did you ever meet him?"

"Once. Once was enough. Jack and me invited the two of them down for Christmas. We had a hen turkey and all the trimmings. But that Bruce Campion acted like he was on a slumming expedition. He hauled poor Dolly out of here so fast you'd think there was a quarantine sign on the house. Little did he know that some of the best people in town are our good friends."

"Did you quarrel with him?"

"You bet I did. What did he have to act so snooty about? Dolly told me they were living in a garage, and we've owned our own house here for twenty-odd years. So I asked him what he planned to do for her. When was he going to get a job and so on? He said he married her, didn't he, and that was all he planned to do for her, said he already had a job doing his own work. So I asked him how much money he made and he said not very much, but they were getting along with the help of friends. I told him my daughter wasn't a charity case, and he said that's what *I* thought.

Imagine him talking like that to her own mother, and her six months pregnant at the time. I tried to talk her into cutting her losses and staying here with us, but Dolly wouldn't. She was too loyal."

Mrs. Stone had the total recall of a woman with a grievance. I interrupted her flow of words: "Were they getting along with each other?"

"*She* was getting along with him. It took a saint to do it and that's what she was, a saint." She rummaged in a sewing basket beside her. "I want to show you a letter she wrote me after Christmas. If you ever saw a devoted young wife it was her."

She produced a crumpled letter addressed to her and post-marked "Luna Bay, Dec. 27." It was written in pencil on a sheet of sketching paper by an immature hand:

Dear Elizabeth,

I'm sorry you and Bruce had to fight. He is moody but he is really A-okay if you only know him. We appresiate the twenty—it will come in handy to buy a coat—I only hope Bruce does not get to it first—he spends so much on his painting—I realy need a coat. Its colder up here than it was in Citrus J. I realy appresiate you asking me to stay (I'm a poet and dont know it!) but a girl has to stick with her "hubby" thru thick and thin—after all Bruce stuck with me. Maybe he is hard to get along with but he is a lot better than "no hubby at all." Dont you honestly think hes cute? Besides some of the people we know think his pictures are real great and he will make a "killing"—then you will be glad I stuck with Bruce.

Love to Jack
Dolly
(*Mrs. Bruce Campion*)

"Doesn't it tear your heart out?" Mrs. Stone said, plucking at the neighborhood of hers. "I mean the way she idolized him and all?"

I assumed a suitably grim expression. It came naturally enough. I was thinking of the cultural gap between Dolly and Harriet, and the flexibility of the man who had straddled it.

"How did she happen to marry him, Mrs. Stone?"

"It's the old old story. You probably know what happened. She was an innocent girl. She'd never even been away from home before. He corrupted her, and he had to take the consequences." She was a little alarmed by what she had said. She dropped her eyes, and added: "It was partly my own fault, I admit it. I never should have let her go off to Nevada by herself, a young girl like her."

"How old?"

"Dolly was just twenty when she left home. That was a year ago last May. She was working in the laundry and she wasn't happy there, under her father's thumb. She wanted to have more of a life of her own. I couldn't blame her for that. A girl with her looks could go far."

She paused, and her eyes went into long focus. Perhaps she was remembering that a girl with her own looks hadn't. Perhaps she was remembering how far Dolly had gone, all the way out of life.

"Anyway," she said, "I let her go up to Tahoe and get herself a job. It was just to be for the summer. She was supposed to save her money, so she could prepare herself for something permanent. I wanted her to go to beauty school. She was very good at grooming herself—it was the one real talent she had. She took after me in that. But then she ran into *him*, and that was the end of beauty school and everything else."

"Did she make any other friends up at the lake?"

"Yeah, there was one little girl who helped her out, name of Fawn. She was a beauty operator, and Dolly thought very highly of her. She even wrote me about her. I was glad she had a girl friend like that. I thought it would give her some ambition. Beauty operators command good money, and you can get a job practically anywhere. I always regretted I didn't take it up myself. Jack makes a fair salary at the laundry, but it's been hard these last years, with inflation and all. Now we have the baby to contend with."

She raised her eyes to the ceiling.

"I'd like to see the baby."

"He's upstairs sleeping. What do you want to see him for?"

"I like babies."

"You don't look the type. I'm not the type myself, not any more. You get out of the habit of attending to their needs. Still," she added in a softer voice, "the little man's a comfort to me. He's all I have left of Dolores. You can come and take a look long as you don't wake him."

I followed her up the rubber-treaded staircase. The baby's room was dim and hot. She turned on a shaded wall light. He was lying uncovered in the battered crib which I had seen in Mungan's glaring photographs. As Mungan had predicted, he didn't resemble anyone in particular. Small and vulnerable and profoundly sleeping, he was simply a baby. His breath was sweet.

His grandmother pulled a sheet up over the round Buddha eye of his umbilicus. I stood above him, trying to guess what he would look like when he grew up. It was hard to imagine him as a man, with a man's passions.

"This was Dolly's own crib," Mrs. Stone was saying. "We sent it up

with them at Christmas. Now we have it back here." I heard her breath being drawn in. "Thank God his crazy father spared him, anyway."

"What's his name?"

"Dolly called him Jack, after her father. Dolly and her father were always close. What do you think of him?"

"He's a fine healthy baby."

"Oh, I do for him the best I can. It isn't easy to go back to it, though, after twenty years. My only hope is that I can bring him up properly. I guess I didn't do such a good job of bringing Dolly up."

I murmured something encouraging as we started down-stairs. Like other women I had known, she had the strength to accept the worst that could happen and go on from there. Moving like a dreamer into the living room, she went to the mantel and took down a framed photograph.

"Did you ever see a picture of my daughter?"

"Not a good one."

The picture she showed me was an improvement on Mungan's, but it wasn't a good one, either. It looked like what it was, a small-town high-school graduation picture, crudely retouched in color. Dolly smiled and smiled like a painted angel.

"She's—she was pretty, wasn't she?"

"Very," I said.

"You wouldn't think she'd have to settle for a Bruce Campion. As a matter of fact, she didn't have to. There were any number of boys around town interested. There used to be a regular caravan out here. Only Dolly wasn't interested in the boys. She wanted to get out of Citrus for life. Besides, she always went for the older ones. I think sometimes," she said quite innocently, "that came from being so fond of her father and all. She never felt at home with boys her own age. The truth is, in a town this size, the *decent* older ones are already married off."

"Was Dolly friends with some of the other kind?"

"She most certainly was not. Dolly was always a good girl, and leery of bad company. Until that Campion got ahold of her."

"What about her friends at Tahoe? Were there other men besides Campion in her life?"

"I don't know what you mean by in her *life*." Almost roughly, she took the picture of Dolly out of my hands and replaced it on the mantel. With her back still turned, she said across the width of the room: "What are you getting at, mister?"

"I'm trying to find out how Dolly lived before she married Campion. I understand she lost her job and got some help from friends, including Fawn King. You said she wrote you about Fawn. Do you have the letter?"

"No. I didn't keep it."

"Did she mention any other friends besides Fawn?"

She came back toward me shaking her head. Her heels made dents in the carpet. "I think I know what you're getting at. It's just another one of his dirty lies."

"Whose lies?"

"Bruce Campion's lies. He's full of them. When they were here Christmas, he tried to let on to Jack that he wasn't the father, that he married her out of the goodness of his heart."

"Did he say who the father was?"

"Of course he didn't, because there wasn't anybody else. I asked Dolly myself, and she said *he* was the father. Then he turned around and admitted it then and there."

"What did he say?"

"He said he wouldn't argue, said he made his bargain and he would stick to it. He had his gall, talking about her like she was a piece of merchandise. I told him so, and that was when he marched her out of the house. He didn't want her talking any more. He had too much to hide."

"What are you referring to?"

"His lies, and all his other shenanigans. He was a drinker, and heaven knows what else. Dolly didn't say much—she never complained—but I could read between the lines. He went through money like it was water—"

I interrupted her. "Did Dolly ever mention a man named Quincy Ralph Simpson?"

"Simpson? No, she never did. What was that name again?"

"Quincy Ralph Simpson."

"Isn't that the man they found across the street—the one that was buried in Jim Rowland's yard?"

"Yes. He was a friend of your daughter's."

"I don't believe it."

"He was, though. Simpson was the one who introduced her to Campion. After they got married, Simpson gave them a good deal of help, including financial help."

"That doesn't prove anything."

"I'm not trying to make it prove anything. But I'm surprised that Dolly never mentioned Simpson to you."

"We didn't keep in close touch. She wasn't much of a letter writer."

"When did you see Dolly and Campion last?"

"Christmas. I told you about that."

"You didn't see Campion in May?"

"I did not. Jack drove me up there the day they found her, but I shunned *him* like a rattlesnake."

"And he wasn't here in Citrus Junction, after the police released him?"

"How would I know? He wouldn't come to us."

"He may have, in a sense. He may have been across the road burying Ralph Simpson. Whoever buried Simpson must have had a reason for picking the house across from yours."

She squinted at me, as if the light had brightened painfully. "I see what you mean."

"Are you sure Ralph Simpson never came here to your house?"

"There's no reason he should. We didn't even know him." Mrs. Stone was getting restless, twining her hands in her lap.

"But he knew Dolly," I reminded her. "After she was killed, and you brought the baby here, he may have been watching your house."

"Why would he do that?"

"It's been suggested that he was the baby's father."

"I don't believe it." But after a pause, she said: "What kind of a man *was* Ralph Simpson? All I know about him is what I read in the papers, that he was stabbed and buried in the Rowlands' yard."

"I never knew him in life, but I gather he wasn't a bad man. He was loyal, and generous, and I think he had some courage. He spent his own last days trying to track down Dolly's murderer."

"Bruce Campion, you mean?"

"He wasn't convinced that it was Campion."

"And you aren't, either," she said with her mouth tight

"No. I'm not."

Her posture became angular and hostile. I was trying to rob her of her dearest enemy.

"All I can say is, you're mistaken. I *know* he did it. I can feel it, here." She laid her hand over her heart.

"We all make mistakes," I said.

"Yes, and you made more than one. I *know* that Bruce Campion was the baby's father. Dolly wouldn't lie to me."

"Daughters have been known to lie to their mothers."

"Maybe so. But if this Simpson was the father, why didn't he marry her? Answer me that."

"He was already married."

"Now I *know* you're wrong. Dolly would never mess with a married man. The one time she did—" Her eyes widened as though she had frightened herself again. She clamped her mouth shut.

"Tell me about the one time Dolly messed with a married man."

"There was no such time."

"You said there was."

"I'm saying there wasn't. I was thinking about something entirely different. I wouldn't sully her memory with it, so there."

I tried to persuade her to tell me more, with no success. Finally I changed the subject.

"This house across the way where Simpson was found buried—I understand it wasn't occupied at the time."

"You understand right. The Rowlands moved out the first of the year, and the house was standing empty there for months. It was a crying shame what happened to it and the other condemned houses. Some of the wild kids around were using them to carry on in. Jack used to find the bottles and the beer cans all around. They smashed the windows and everything. I hated to see it, even if it didn't matter in the long run. The State just tore the houses down anyway." She seemed to be mourning obscurely over the changes and losses in her own life. "I hated to see them do it to the Jaimet house."

"The Jaimet house?"

She made a gesture in the direction of the road. "I'm talking about that same house. Jim Rowland bought it from Mrs. Jaimet after her husband died. It was the original Jaimet ranch house. This whole west side of town used to be the Jaimet ranch. But that's all past history."

"Tell me about Jim Rowland."

"There's nothing much to tell. He's a good steady man, runs the Union station up the road, and he's opening another station in town. Jack always swears by Rowland. He says he's an honest mechanic, and that's high praise from Jack."

"Did Dolly know him?"

"Naturally she knew him. The Rowlands lived across the street for the last three-four years. If you think it went further than that, you're really off. Jim's a good family man. Anyway, he sold to the State and moved out the first of the year. He wouldn't come back and bury a body in his own yard, if that's what you're thinking."

I was thinking that you never could tell what murderers would do. Most of them were acting out a fantasy which they couldn't explain themselves: destroying an unlamented past which seemed to bar them from the brave new world, erasing the fear of death by inflicting death, or burying an old malignant grief where it would sprout and multiply and end by destroying the destroyer.

I thanked Mrs. Stone for her trouble and walked across the road. The earth movers had stopped for the day, but their dust still hung in the air. Through it I could see uprooted trees, houses smashed to rubble and piled in disorderly heaps. I couldn't tell where Rowland's house had stood.

chapter 22

THE DEPUTY on duty at the Citrus Junction courthouse was a tired-looking man with his blouse open at the neck and a toothpick in his mouth. A deep nirvanic calm lay over his office. Even the motes at the window moved languidly. The ultimate slowdown of the universe would probably begin in Citrus Junction. Perhaps it already had.

I asked the tired man where Sergeant Leonard was. He regarded me morosely, as if I'd interrupted an important meditation.

"Gone to town on business."

"Which town?"

"L.A."

"What business?"

He looked me over some more. Perhaps he was estimating my Bertillon measurements. He belonged to the Bertillon era.

"Anything to do with the Simpson case?" I said.

He removed his toothpick from between his teeth and examined it for clues, such as toothmarks. "We don't discuss official business with the public. You a newspaper fellow?"

"I'm a private detective working with Leonard on the Simpson case."

He was unimpressed. "I'll tell the Sergeant when he comes in. What's your name?"

"S. Holmes."

He reinserted his toothpick in his mouth and wrote haltingly on a scratch pad. I said: "The 'S.' stands for Sherlock."

He looked up from his laborious pencil work. The old crystal set he was using for a brain received a faint and far-off signal: he was being ribbed.

"What did you say the first name was?"

"Sherlock."

"That supposed to be funny? Ha ha," he said.

I started over: "My name is Archer, and Leonard will want to see me. When are you expecting him back?"

"When he gets here."

"Oh, thanks."

"You're welcome." He tore up the paper he had been writing on and let the pieces flutter down onto the counter between us.

"Can you give me Leonard's home address?"

"Sure I can. But you're the great detective. Find it for yourself."

Archer the wit. Archer the public relations wizard. I took my keen sense of humor and social expertise for a walk down the corridor. There was nobody at the information desk inside the front door, but a thin telephone directory was chained to the side of the desk. Wesley Leonard lived on Walnut Street. An old man watering the courthouse chrysanthemums told me where Walnut Street was, a few blocks from here. Archer the bloodhound.

It was a middle-middle-class street of stucco cottages dating from the twenties. The lawn in front of Leonard's cottage was as well kept as a putting green. A stout woman who was not so well kept answered the door.

Pink plastic curlers on her head gave her a grim and defiant expression. She said before I asked: "Wesley's not here. And I'm busy cooking supper."

"Do you know when he'll be back?"

"He's generally home for supper. Wesley likes a good hot supper."

"What time would that be?"

"Six. We eat an early supper." Supper was a key word in her vocabulary. "Who shall I tell him?"

"Lew Archer. I'm the detective who brought Vicky Simpson here last Monday night. Is Mrs. Simpson still with you?"

"No. She only stayed the one night." The woman said in a sudden gush of confidence: "Wesley's such a good Samaritan, he doesn't realize. Are you a real good friend of Mrs. Simpson's?"

"No."

"Well, I wouldn't want to insult her. She has her troubles. But it's hard on an older woman having a younger woman in the house. A younger woman with all those troubles, it puts a strain on the marriage." She ran her fingers over her curlers, as if they were holding the marriage precariously together. "You know how men are."

"Not Wesley."

"Yes, Wesley. He's not immune. No man is." She looked ready to be disappointed in me at any moment. "Wesley was up half the night letting

her cry on his shoulder. Heating milk. Making a grilled cheese sandwich at four A.M. He hasn't made me a sandwich in ten years. So after she woke up at noon and I gave her her lunch I tactfully suggested that she should try the hotel. Wesley says I acted hardhearted. I say I was only heading off trouble in the marriage."

"What's she using for money?"

"Her boss wired her an advance on her wages, and I guess the boys in the courthouse chipped in some. Mrs. Vicky Simpson is comfortably ensconced."

"Where?"

"The Valencia Hotel, on Main Street."

It had stood there for forty or fifty years, a three-story cube of bricks that had once been white. Old men in old hats were watching the street through the front window. Their heads turned in unison to follow my progress across the dim lobby. It was so quiet I could hear their necks, or their chairs, creak.

There was nobody on duty at the desk. I punched the hand-bell. It didn't work. One of the old men rose from his chair near the window and shuffled past me through a door at the back. He reappeared behind the desk, adjusting a glossy brown toupee which he had substituted for his hat. It settled low on his forehead.

"Yessir?"

"Is Mrs. Simpson in?"

He turned to inspect the bank of pigeonholes behind him. The back of his neck was naked as a plucked chicken's.

"Yessir. She's in."

"Tell her there's someone who wants to speak to her."

"No telephone in her room. I guess I could go up and tell her," he said doubtfully.

"I'll go. What's her number?"

"Three-oh-eight on the third floor. But we don't like gentlemen visitors in a lady's room." Somehow his toupee made this remark sound low-brow and obscene.

"I'm no gentleman. I'm a detective."

"I see."

He and his friends by the window watched me go up the stairs. I was the event of the day. A red bulb lit the third-floor corridor. I tapped on the door of 308.

"Who is it?" Vicky said in a dull voice.

"Lew Archer. Remember me?"

Bedsprings made a protesting noise. She opened the door and peered out. Her face had thinned.

"What do you want?"

"Some talk."

"I'm all run out of talk."

Her eyes were enormous and vulnerable. I could see myself mirrored in their pupils, a tiny red-lit man caught in amber, twice.

"Let me in, Vicky. I need your help."

She shrugged and walked away from the open door, sprawling on the bed in a posture that seemed deliberately ugly. Her breasts and hips stood out under her black dress like protuberances carved from something hard and durable, wood or bone. A Gideon Bible lay open on the bed. I saw when I sat down in the chair beside it that Vicky had been reading the Book of Job.

"I didn't know you were a Bible reader."

"There's lots of things you don't know about me."

"That's true. Why didn't you tell me Ralph was a friend of the Campions?"

"That should be easy to figure out. I didn't want you to know."

"But why?"

"It's none of your business."

"We have business in common, Vicky. We both want to get this mess straightened out."

"It'll never get straightened out. Ralph's dead. You can't change that."

"Was he involved in Dolly's murder? Is that why you covered for him?"

"I didn't cover for him."

"Of course you did. You must have recognized Campion from the description I gave you. You must have known that Dolly had been murdered. You knew that Ralph was close to her."

"He wasn't—not in the way you mean."

"In what way was he close to her?"

"He was more like her financial adviser," she said in a halting voice.

"Dolly had no use for a financial adviser. She was stony broke."

"That's what you think. I happen to know she was loaded at the time she was killed. Ralph told me she had at least a thousand dollars in cash. She didn't know what to do with it, so she asked Ralph."

"You must be mistaken, Vicky. The Campions had no money. I was told that Ralph had to pay the doctor when their child was born."

"He didn't *have* to. He had a good day at the race track and gave them the money. When Ralph won a little money he thought he was Santa Claus. Don't think I didn't put up a squawk. But she paid him back after all."

"When?"

"Just before she was killed. Out of the money she had. That's how he financed his trip to Tahoe."

It was a peculiar story, peculiar enough to be true.

"Did Ralph actually see all the money Dolly claimed she had?"

"He saw it. He didn't count it or anything, but he saw it. She asked him to take it and hold it for her, so she could make a down payment on a tract house. Ralph didn't want the responsibility. He advised her to put it in the bank, but she was afraid Bruce would find out, and it would be gone with the wind. Like the other money—the money she had when he married her."

"I didn't know she had any."

"What do you think he married her for? She had plenty, according to Ralph, another thousand anyway. Bruce took it and blew it. She was afraid he'd do the same with the new money."

"Where did all the money come from?"

"Ralph said she got it out of a man. She wasn't saying who."

"Was the man the father of her child?"

She lowered her eyes demurely. "I always thought Bruce was the father."

"Bruce denied it."

"I never heard that."

"I did, Vicky. Do you have any idea who the father was if it wasn't Bruce?"

"No."

"Could it have been Ralph?"

"No. There was nothing between him and Dolly. For one thing, he had too much respect for Bruce."

"But the child was conceived long before she married Campion. Also you tell me she confided in Ralph about her money problems. Didn't you say she wanted him to look after her thousand dollars?"

"Yes, and maybe he should have." She glanced around the little room as if someone might be spying at the keyhole or the window. She lowered her voice to a whisper: "I think she was killed for that money."

"By Bruce, you mean?"

"By him, or somebody else."

"Did Ralph tell the police about it?"

"No."

"And you didn't either?"

"Why should I ask for trouble? You get enough trouble in this life without coming out and asking for it."

I rose and stood over her. Late afternoon sunlight slanted in through

the window. She sat rigid with her legs under her, as if the shafts of light had transfixed her neck and shoulders.

"You were afraid Ralph killed her."

Her eyes shifted away from mine and stayed far over in the corners of her head. "Deputy Mungan made Ralph come down to the station and answer a lot of questions. Then Ralph went off to Nevada right after. Naturally I was scared."

"Where was Ralph the night Dolly was killed?"

"I don't know. He was out late, and I didn't wake up when he came in."

"You still think Ralph murdered her?"

"I didn't say I *thought* it. I was scared."

"Did you ask him?"

"Of course I didn't ask him. But he kept talking about the murder. He was so upset and shaky he couldn't handle a cup of coffee. This was the night after it happened. They had Bruce Campion in the clink, and Ralph kept saying that Bruce didn't do it, he knew Bruce didn't do it."

"Did Ralph see Bruce before he left for Tahoe?"

"Yeah, Bruce came to the house in the morning when they let him out. I wouldn't of let him *in* if I'd been there."

"What happened between Bruce and Ralph that morning?"

"I wouldn't know. I was at work. Ralph phoned me around noon and said he was going up to Tahoe. Maybe Bruce went with him. He dropped out of sight that same day, and I never saw him again. A couple of days after that, the papers were full of him running away, and the Grand Jury brought in a murder conviction."

"The Grand Jury indicted him," I said. "There's a big difference between an indictment and a conviction."

"That's what Ralph said, the day he came back from the lake. I thought a week or so away from it all would get it off his mind. But he was worse than ever when he came back. He was obsessed with Bruce Campion."

"Just how close were they?"

"They were like brothers," she said, "ever since they were in Korea together. Bruce had more on the ball than Ralph had, I guess, but somehow it was Ralph who did the looking after. He thought it was wonderful to have Bruce for a friend. He'd give him the shirt off his back, and he practically did more than once."

"Would Ralph give Bruce his birth certificate to get out of the country?"

She glanced up sharply. "Did he?"

"Bruce says he did. Either Ralph gave it to him voluntarily, or Bruce took it by force."

"And killed him?"

"I have my doubts that Bruce killed either one of them. He had no apparent motive to kill Ralph, and the money Dolly had puts a new complexion on her case. It provides a motive for anyone who knew she had it."

"But why would anybody want to kill Ralph?"

"There's one obvious possibility. He may have known who murdered Dolly."

"Why didn't he say so, then?"

"Perhaps he wasn't sure. I believe he was trying to investigate Dolly's murder, up at the lake and probably here in Citrus Junction. When he came back from Tahoe, did he say anything to you about the Blackwells?"

"The Blackwells?" There was no recognition in her voice.

"Colonel Mark Blackwell and his wife. They brought me into this case, because their daughter Harriet had taken up with Campion. The Blackwells have a lodge at Tahoe, and Harriet was there with Campion the night before last. Then she disappeared. We found her hat in the lake with blood on it. Campion has no explanation."

Vicky rose on her knees. Moving awkwardly, she backed away to the far side of the bed. "I don't know nothing about it."

"That's why I'm telling you. The interesting thing is that Ralph spent some time in the Blackwells' lodge last May. He worked as their houseboy for a week or so. They fired him, allegedly for stealing."

"Ralph might of had his faults," she said from her corner, "but I never knew him to steal anything in his life. Anyway, there's no sense trying to pin something on a dead man."

"I'm not, Vicky. I'm trying to pin murder on whoever killed him. You loved him, didn't you?"

She looked as though she would have liked to deny it and the pain that went with it. "I couldn't help it. I tried to help it, but I couldn't stop myself. He was such a crazy guy," she murmured, so softly that it sounded like an endearment. "Sometimes when he was asleep, when he was asleep and out of trouble, I used to think he was beautiful."

"He's asleep and out of trouble now," I said. "What about the bundle of clothes he brought back from Tahoe?"

"There was no bundle of clothes, there was just the coat. He had this brown topcoat with him. But I know he didn't steal it. He never stole in his life."

"I don't care whether he stole it or not. The question is where did he get it?"

"He *said* somebody gave it to him. But people don't give away that kind of a coat for free. It was real good tweed, imported like. Harris

tweed, I think they call it. It must of cost a hundred dollars new, and it was still in new condition. The only thing the matter with it, one of the buttons was missing."

"Can you describe the buttons?"

"They were brown leather. I wanted to try and match the missing one so he could wear it. But he said leave it as it was, he wasn't going to wear it." Tears glistened in her eyes. "He said he wasn't going to wear it and he was right."

"Did he bring it with him when he came down south?"

"Yeah. He was carrying it over his arm when he got on the bus. I don't know why he bothered dragging it along with him. It was warm weather, and anyway it had that button missing."

"Which button on the coat was missing, Vicky?"

"The top one." She pointed with her thumb between her breasts.

I wished I had Mungan's button with me. I remembered now where I had seen other buttons like it, attached to a coat that answered Vicky's description. One of the girls in the zebra-striped hearse had been wearing it.

chapter 23

I DROVE BACK to the coast and hit the surfing beaches southward from the fork of 101 and 101 Alternate. Some of the surfers recalled the black-and-white hearse, but they didn't know the names of any of the occupants. Anyway they claimed they didn't—they're a closemouthed tribe.

I had better luck with the Highway Patrol in Malibu. The owner of the hearse had been cited the previous week end for driving with only one headlight. His name was Ray Buzzell, and he lived in one of the canyons above the town.

"Mrs. Sloan Buzzell" was stenciled on the side of the rustic mailbox. An asphalt driveway zigzagged down the canyon side to her house. It was a redwood and glass structure with a white gravel roof, cantilevered over a steep drop. A small Fiat stood in the double carport, but there was no hearse beside it.

A violently redheaded woman opened the front door before I got to it, and stepped outside. Her hard, handsome face was carefully made up, as though she'd been expecting a visitor. I wondered what kind of visitor. Her black Capri pants adhered like oil to her thighs and hips. The plunging neckline of her shirt exhibited large areas of chest and stomach. She was carrying a half-full martini glass in her hand and, to judge by her speech, a number of previous martinis inside of her.

"Hello-hello," she said. "Don't I know you from somewhere?"

"I'm just a type. How are you, Mrs. Buzzell?"

"Fine. Feen. Fane." She flexed her free arm to prove it, and inflated her chest, which almost broke from its moorings. "*You* look sort of beat. Come in and I'll pour you a drink. I hope you drink."

"Quantities, but not at the moment, thanks. I'm looking for Ray."

She frowned muzzily. "People are always looking for Ray. Has he done something?"

"I hope not. Where can I find him?"

She flung out her arm in a gesture which included the whole coast. From the height we stood on, we could see a good many miles of it. The sun was low in the west, and it glared like a searchlight through barred clouds.

"I can't keep track of my son any more," she said in a soberer voice. "I haven't seen him since breakfast. He's off with his crowd somewhere. All they care about is surfing. Some weeks I don't set eyes on him for days at a time." She consoled herself with the rest of her martini. "Sure you won't come in for a drink? I just made a fresh shaker, and if I have to drink it all by myself I'll be smasherooed."

"Pour it out."

"The man is mad." She studied my face with exaggerated interest. "You must be a wandering evangelist or something."

"I'm a wandering detective investigating a murder. Your son may be able to help me."

She moved closer to me and whispered through her teeth: "Is Ray involved in a murder?"

"That I doubt. He may have some information that will help me. Are you expecting him home for dinner?"

"I never know. Sometimes he's out all night with his crowd. They have bedrolls in the hearse." She burst out angrily: "I could *kill* myself for letting him buy that thing. He practically *lives* in it." Her mind veered back to the point. "What do you mean, he has information?"

"I said he may have."

"Who was murdered?"

"A man named Simpson, Quincy Ralph Simpson."

"I never heard of any such man. Neither did Ray, I'm sure."

I said: "When Simpson was last seen alive by his wife, he was carrying a brown Harris tweed topcoat with brown leather buttons; the top button was missing. That was two months ago. The other day I saw one of the girls in Ray's crowd wearing that topcoat, or one exactly like it."

"Mona?"

"She was a big chesty blonde."

"That's Ray's girl, Mona Sutherland. And the coat is his, too. I know it well. His father gave it to him the last time Ray visited him, so you see you've made a mistake. It's a different coat entirely."

"Now tell me where Ray really got it, Mrs. Buzzell."

The manifestations of mother love are unpredictable. She threw her empty glass at my head. It missed me and smashed on the flagstones. Then she retreated into the house, slamming the door behind her.

I got into my car and sat. The sun was almost down, a narrowing red lozenge on the cloud-streaked horizon. It slipped out of sight. The whole western sky became smoky red, as if the sun had touched off fires on the far side of the world.

After a while the front door opened. The lady appeared with a fresh glass in her hand.

"I've just been talking to my ex on the long-distance telephone. He'll back me up about the coat."

"Bully for him."

She looked at the glass in her hand as if she was considering throwing it, too. But it had liquor in it.

"What right have you got sitting on my property? Get off my property!"

I turned the car and drove up past her mailbox and parked at the roadside and watched the horizontal fires die out and the dark come on. The sky was crowded with stars when the woman came out again. She plodded up the slope and balanced her teetering weight against the mailbox.

"I'm smasherooed."

I got out and approached her. "I told you to pour it out."

"I couldn't do that to good gin. It's been my dearest friend and beloved companion for lo these many yea-hears." She reached for me like a blind woman. "I'm frightened."

"I didn't mean to frighten you, and I don't believe your son is involved in this murder. But I have to know where he got the tweed topcoat. His father had nothing to do with it, did he?"

"No. Ray told me he found it."

"Where?"

"On the beach, he said."

"How long ago was this?"

"About two months. He brought it home and brushed the sand out of it. That's why I got so frightened, on account of the timing. You said two months. That's why I lied to you."

She was leaning on me heavily, one hand on my shoulder, the other clutching my upper arm. I let her lean.

"Ray couldn't murder anyone," she said. "He's a little hard to regiment but he's not a bad boy really. And he's so *young*."

"He's not a murder suspect, Mrs. Buzzell. He's a witness, and the coat is evidence. How he got it may be significant. But I can't establish that without talking to him. You must have some idea where I can find him."

"He did say something this morning—something about spending the night at Zuma. I know he took along some things to cook. But what he

says and what he actually does are often two different things. I can't keep track of him any more. He needs a father."

She was talking into the front of my coat, and her grip had tightened on me. I held her for a bit, because she needed holding, until a car came up the road and flashed its headlights on her wet startled face.

The striped hearse was standing empty among other cars off the highway above Zuma. I parked behind it and went down to the beach to search for its owner. Bonfires were scattered along the shore, like the bivouacs of nomad tribes or nuclear war survivors. The tide was high and the breakers loomed up marbled black and fell white out of oceanic darkness.

Six young people were huddled under blankets around one of the fires. I recognized them: one of the girls was wearing the brown tweed coat. They paid no attention when I approached. I was an apparition from the adult world. If they pretended I wasn't there, I would probably go away like all the other adults.

"I'm looking for Ray Buzzell."

One of the boys cupped his hand behind his ear and said: "Hey?"

He was an overgrown seventeen- or eighteen-year-old with heavy masculine features unfocused by any meaning in his eyes. In spite of his peroxided hair, he looked like an Indian in the red firelight.

"Ray Buzzell," I repeated.

"Never heard of him." He glanced around at the others. "Anybody ever hear of a Ray Buzzell?"

"*I* never heard of a Ray Buzzell," the girl in the coat said. "I knew a man named Heliogabalus Rexford Buzzell. He had a long grey beard and he died some years ago of bubonic plague."

Everybody laughed except me and the girl. I said to the boy: "You're Ray, aren't you?"

"Depends who you are." He rose in a sudden single movement, shedding his blanket. The three other boys rose, too. "You fuzz?"

"You're getting warm, kid."

"Don't call me kid."

"What do you want me to call you?"

"Anything but kid."

"All right, Mr. Buzzell. I have some questions to ask you, about the coat Miss Sutherland is wearing."

"Who you been talking to? How come you know our names?"

He took a step toward me, his bare feet noiseless in the sand. His little comitatus grouped themselves behind him. They crossed their arms on their chests to emphasize their muscles, and the red firelight flickered on their biceps.

With a little judo I thought I could handle all eight of their biceps, but I didn't want to hurt them. I was an emissary from the adult camp. I flashed the special-deputy's badge which I carried as a souvenir of an old trouble on the San Pedro docks.

"I've been talking to your mother, among other people. She said you found the coat on the beach."

"Never believe her," he said with one eye on the girls. "Never believe a mother."

"Where did you get it then?"

"I wove it underwater out of sea lettuce. I'm very clever with my hands." He wiggled his fingers at me.

"I wouldn't go on playing this for laughs, Buzzell. It's a serious matter. Have you ever been in Citrus Junction?"

"I guess I passed through."

"Did you stop over long enough to kill and bury a man?"

"Bury a man?" He was appalled.

"His name was Quincy Ralph Simpson. He was found buried in Citrus Junction last week, with an icepick wound in his heart. Did you know him?"

"I never heard of him, honest. Besides, we've had the coat for a couple of months." His voice had regressed five years, and sounded as though it was changing all over again. He turned to the girl. "Isn't that right, Mona?"

She nodded. Her sea-lion eyes were wide and scared. With scrabbling fingers she unbuttoned the coat and flung it off. I held out my hands for it. Ray Buzzell picked it up and gave it to me. His movements had lost their certainty.

The coat was heavy, with matted fibers that smelled of the sea. I folded it over my arm.

"Where did you get it, Ray?"

"On the beach, like Moth—like the old lady said. It was salvage, like. I'm always living off the beach, picking up salvage and jetsam. Isn't that right, Mona?"

She nodded, still without breaking silence.

His voice rushed on in an adolescent spate: "It was soaked through, and there were stones in the pockets, like somebody chunked it in the drink to get rid of it. But there was a strong tide running, and the waves washed it up on the beach. It was still in pretty good condition, this Harris tweed is indestructible, so I decided to dry it out and keep it. It was like salvage. Mona wears it mostly—she's the one that gets cold."

She was shivering in her bathing suit now, close by the fire. The other girl draped a plaid shirt over her shoulders. The boys were standing around desultorily, like figures relaxing out of a battle frieze.

"Can you name the beach?"

"I don't remember. We go to a lot of beaches."

"I know which one it was," Mona said. "It was the day we had the six-point-five and I was scared to go out in them and you all said I was chicken. *You* know," she said to the others, "that little private beach above Malibu where they have the shrimp joint across the highway."

"Yeah," Ray said. "We ate there the other day. Crummy joint."

"I saw you there the other day," I said. "Now let's see if we can pin down the date you found the coat."

"I don't see how. That was a long time ago, a couple months."

The girl rose and touched his arm. "What about the tide tables, Ray-buzz?"

"What about them?"

"We had a six-point-five tide that day. We haven't had many this year. You've got the tide tables in the car, haven't you?"

"I guess so."

The three of us went up the beach to the zebra-striped hearse. Ray found the dog-eared booklet, and Mona scanned it under the dashboard lights.

"It was May the nineteenth," she said positively. "It couldn't have been any other day."

I thanked her. I thanked them both, but she was the one with the brains. As I drove back toward Los Angeles, I wondered what Mona was doing on the beach. Perhaps if I met her father or her mother I could stop wondering.

chapter 24

THE BLACKWELL HOUSE was dark. I pressed the bell push, and the chimes inside gave out a lonely tinkling. I waited and rang again and waited and rang and waited.

Eventually I heard footsteps inside. The veranda light went on over my head, and the little maid looked out at me sleepily. She was out of uniform and out of sorts.

"What do *you* want?"

"Are the Blackwells in?"

"She is. He isn't."

"Tell her Mr. Archer would like to speak to her."

"I can't do that. She's in bed asleep. I was asleep myself." She yawned in my face, and hugged her rayon bathrobe more closely around her.

"You go to bed early, Letty."

"I had to get *up* early this morning, so I thought I might as well catch up on my rest. Mrs. Blackwell took some sleeping pills and left strict orders not to be disturbed. She went to bed right after dinner."

"Is Mrs. Blackwell all right?"

"She said she had a blinding headache but she gets those from time to time."

"How many sleeping pills did she take?"

"A couple."

"What kind?"

"The red kind. Why?"

"Nothing. Where's the lord and master?"

"He left early this morning. He had a phone call, about Miss Harriet, and he made me get up and make breakfast for him. It isn't a regular part of my duties but the cook sleeps out—"

I cut in on her explanations: "Do you know where he is now?"

"He went up to Tahoe to help them search for her body. That's where the phone call was from."

"They haven't found her, then?"

"No. What do you think happened to her?"

"I think she's in the lake."

"That's what he said." She stepped outside, partly closing the door behind her. "He was in bad shape at breakfast. He couldn't eat he was so broken up. I didn't think he should go off there by himself. But he wouldn't let me wake up Mrs. Blackwell, and what could I do?"

She crossed the veranda and looked up at the stars. She sighed, and laid a hand on her round pink rayon bosom.

"How long have you been working for the Blackwells?"

"Two months. It seems like longer. I mean with all the trouble in the house."

"Trouble between Mr. and Mrs. Blackwell?"

"They've had their share. But it don't behoove me to talk about it."

"Don't they get along?"

"They get along as well as most, I guess. A-course they've only been married eight or nine months. It's the long pull that counts, my daddy says, and the Colonel must be twenty years older than her."

"Is that an issue between the Blackwells?"

"No, I don't mean that. Only it makes you wonder why she married him. Mrs. Blackwell may have her faults, but she's not the gold-digging type."

"I'm interested in what you think of her and her faults."

"I don't talk behind people's backs," she said with some spirit. "Mrs. Blackwell treats me good, and I try to treat her good back. She's a nice lady to work for. He isn't so bad either."

"Did they take you up to Tahoe in May?"

"That was before I started with them. Just my luck. They were talking about going up again in September, but it's probably all off now. They wouldn't want to stay in the lodge so soon after what happened there. I wouldn't want to myself."

"Were you fond of Harriet?"

"I wouldn't say that. I never saw much of her. But I felt kind of sorry for her, even before this happened. She was a real sad cookie, even with all that money. It's too bad she had to die before she had any happiness in life. She put on a pretty good front, but you ought to seen the crying tantrums she threw in the privacy of her own room. My mother is a practical nurse, and I tried to calm her down a couple of times."

"What was she crying about?"

"Nobody loved her, she said. She said she was ugly. I told her she had a real nice figure and other attractive features, but she couldn't see it. This was in June, before she went to Mexico. It's easy to understand why she was such a pushover for that artist guy—the one with all the names that murdered her." She looked at the stars again, and coughed at their chilliness. "I think I'm catching cold. I better get back to bed. You never can tell when they'll get you up around here."

She went back into the dark house. I went down the hill and turned left on Sunset toward my office. I drove automatically in the light evening traffic. My mind was sifting the facts I'd scraped together, the facts and the semi-facts and the semi-demi-semi-facts. One of the semi-facts had become a certainty since I'd learned that the tweed coat had been found near the Blackwells' beach house: the Blackwell case and the Dolly Campion case and the Ralph Simpson case were parts of one another. Dolly and Ralph and probably Harriet had died by the same hand, and the coat could be used to identify the hand.

I spread it out on the desk in my office and looked at it under the light. The leather buttons were identical with the one Mungan had shown me. Where the top one had been pulled off there were some strands of broken thread corresponding with the threads attached to Mungan's button. I had no doubt that an identification man with a microscope could tie that button and this coat together.

I turned the coat over, scattering sand across the desk and the floor. It had a Harris label on the right inside breast pocket, and under it the label of the retailers: Cruttworth, Ltd., Toronto. My impulse was to phone the Cruttworth firm right away. But it was the middle of the night in Toronto, and the best I could hope for was a chat with the night watchman.

I searched in vain for cleaners' marks. Perhaps the coat had never been cleaned. In spite of its rough usage on the beach, the cuffs and the collar showed no sign of wear.

I tried the thing on. It was small for me, tight across the chest. I wondered how it would fit Campion. It was a heavy coat, and a heavy thought, and I began to sweat. I struggled out of the coat. It hugged me like guilt.

I knew a man named Sam Garlick who specialized in identifying clothes and connecting them with their rightful owners in court. He was a Detective Sergeant in the L.A.P.D. His father and his grandfather had been tailors.

I called Sam's house in West Los Angeles. His mother-in-law informed me that the Garlicks were out celebrating their twenty-second wedding anniversary. She was looking after the three smaller children, and they were a handful, but she'd finally got them off to bed. Yes, Sam would be on duty in the morning.

While the receiver was in my hand, I dialed my answering service. Both Arnie Walters and Isobel Blackwell had called me earlier in the day. The most recent calls were from Sergeant Wesley Leonard and a woman named Mrs. Hatchen, who was staying at the Santa Monica Inn. Mrs. Hatchen. Harriet's mother. The long loops were intersecting, and I was at the point of intersection.

I put in a call to the Santa Monica Inn. The switchboard operator told me after repeated attempts that Mrs. Hatchen's room didn't answer. The desk clerk thought she'd gone out for a late drive. She had checked into a single late that afternoon.

I returned Leonard's call. He answered on the first ring.

"Sergeant Leonard here."

"Archer. You wanted to talk to me?"

"I thought you wanted to talk to me. The wife mentioned you were here this afternoon."

"I had some evidence that should interest you. I have more now than I had then."

"What is it?"

"The coat Ralph Simpson had with him when he left home. I'm hoping it will lead us to the killer."

"How?" he said, rather competitively.

"It's a little complicated for the phone. We should get together, Sergeant."

"I concur. I've got something hotter than the coat." He was a simple man, and simple pride swelled in his voice. "So hot I can't even tell you over the phone."

"Do you come here or do I go there?"

"You come to me. I have my reasons. You know where I live."

He was waiting for me on the lighted porch, looking younger and taller than I remembered him. There was a flush on his cheeks and a glitter in his eyes, as if the hotness of his evidence had raised his temperature.

I suspected that he was letting me in on it because he secretly doubted his competence to handle it. He had anxiety in him, too. He pumped my hand, and seemed to have a hard time letting go.

Mrs. Leonard had made lemonade and egg-salad sandwiches, and laid them out on a coffee table in the small over-furnished living room. She poured two glasses of lemonade from a pitcher clinking with ice. Then she retreated into the kitchen, shutting the door with crisp tact. I had forgotten to eat, and I wolfed several sandwiches while Leonard talked.

"I've found the murder weapon," he announced. "I didn't find it per-

sonally, but it was my own personal idea that led to its disclosure. Ever since we uncovered Simpson's body, I've had a crew of county prisoners out there mornings picking over the scene of the crime. This morning one of them came across the icepick and turned it in."

"Let me see it."

"It's down at the courthouse, locked up. I'll show it to you later."

"What makes you certain it's the weapon?"

"I took it into the L.A. crime lab today. They gave it a test for blood traces, and got a positive reaction. Also, it fits the puncture in Simpson's body."

"Any icepick would."

"But this is it. This is the one." He leaned toward me urgently across the plate of sandwiches. "I had to be sure, and I made sure."

"Fingerprints?"

"No. The only prints were the ones from the prisoner that found it. It was probably wiped clean before the murderer stuck it in the dirt. I've got something better than fingerprints. And worse, in a way."

"You're talking in riddles, Sergeant."

"It's a riddle for sure." He glanced at the closed door to the kitchen, and lowered his voice. "The icepick was part of a little silver bar set which was sold right here in town last October. I had no trouble tracking down the store because there's only the one good hardware store here in town. That's Drake Hardware, and Mr. Drake identified the icepick personally tonight. He just had the one set like it in stock, and he remembered who he sold it to. She's a local citizen — a woman my wife has known for years."

"Who is she?"

Leonard raised his hand as if he was back on traffic point duty. "Not so fast. I don't know that I'm justified telling you her name. It wouldn't mean anything to you, anyway. She's a Citrus Junction woman, lived here all her life. Always had a clean record, till now. But it looks dark for her, or maybe her husband. There's more than the icepick tying them into the murder. They live directly across the road from the site where we found the icepick *and* the body."

"Are we talking about Mr. and Mrs. Stone?"

He looked at me in surprise. "You know Jack and Liz Stone?"

"I interviewed her this afternoon. He wasn't there."

"What were you doing—questioning her about the Simpson killing?"

"We discussed it, but I didn't consider her a suspect. We talked mostly about her daughter Dolly —and what happened to her."

Leonard made a lugubrious face. "That was a bad blow to the Stone couple. The way I figure it, psychologically speaking, the murder of their

girl could of drove them over the edge. Maybe Simpson had something to do with that murder, and they killed him in revenge."

"It's a possible motive, all right. Simpson was definitely involved with Dolly and her husband. Have you questioned the Stones?"

"Not yet. I just got Mr. Drake's identification of the icepick tonight. I talked it over with the Sheriff and he says I should wait until the D.A. gets back from Sacramento. He's due back tomorrow. We wouldn't want to make a serious mistake, the Sheriff says." Clear sweat, like distilled anxiety, burst out on his forehead. "The Stones aren't moneyed folks but they've always had a good reputation and plenty of friends in town. Liz Stone is active in the Eastern Star." He took a long gulp of lemonade.

"Somebody ought to ask her about the icepick."

"That's my opinion, too. Unfortunately my hands are tied until the D.A. gets back."

"Mine aren't."

He regarded me appraisingly. Clearly he was asking himself how far he could trust me. He tossed down the rest of his lemonade and got up.

"Okay. You want to take a look at it first?"

We rode in my car to the courthouse. The icepick was in Leonard's second-floor office, where a map of Citrus County took up one whole wall. He got the thing out of a locker and set it on the table under a magnifying glass on a flexible arm.

A tag bearing Leonard's initials was wired to the handle, and the wire sealed with lead. The square-cut silver handle felt cold to my fingers. The point of the icepick was sharp and dirty, like a bad death.

"There's a corkscrew that goes with it, part of the set," he said. "If Liz and Jack Stone have the corkscrew, it ties it up."

"Maybe. Are they the sort of people that would use a silver bar set, or any kind of a bar set?"

"I never heard that they drank, but you never can tell. One of them could be a secret drinker."

"Secret drinkers don't fool around with fancy accessories. Do I have your permission to show them this thing, and ask for an explanation?"

"I guess so." He wiped his forehead. "Long as you don't go to them in my name, I guess it's all right. But don't make any accusations. We don't want them to panic and go on the run."

I let him out on the sidewalk in front of his house and drove to the west side. The Stones had an upstairs light on. The man who came to the front door was in his pajamas. He was a thin man with bushy sandy hair and defeated eyes.

"Mr. Stone?"

"Yessir."

"I had some conversation with your wife today."

"You're the detective, are you?" he said in a flat voice.

"Yes. I'd appreciate a few minutes more with your wife, and with you, too."

"I dunno, it's getting pretty late. Mrs. Stone is on her way to bed." He glanced up the stairs which rose from the hallway. "Is it about Dolly?"

"It's connected with Dolly."

"Maybe I can handle it, eh?" He squared his narrow shoulders. "It was a terrible sorrow to my wife what happened to Dolly. I hate to see her dragged back to it all the time."

"I'm afraid it's necessary, Mr. Stone."

He took my word for it and went upstairs to fetch her, climbing like a man on a treadmill. They came down together wearing bathrobes. He was holding her arm. Her face and neck were shiny with some kind of cream or oil.

"Come in," she said. "You shouldn't keep a man waiting on the doorstep, Jack. It isn't polite."

We went into the living room, where the three of us stood and looked at each other. The awkwardness developed into tension. The woman pulled at the oily skin of her throat.

"What brings you here so late? Have you found something out?"

"I keep trying, Mrs. Stone." I got the icepick out of my pocket and held it out by the tip. "Have you seen this before?"

"Let me look at it."

She reached out and took it from me by the handle. Her husband leaned at her shoulder, one arm around her waist. He seemed to depend on physical contact with her.

"It looks like the one you bought for Mrs. Jaimet," he said.

"I believe it is. What's this little wire tag doing on it?"

"It's just to identify it. Where did you buy it, Mrs. Stone?"

"At Drake Hardware. It's part of a set I got for Mrs. Jaimet as a wedding gift. Jack thought I spent too much money on it, but I wanted to get her something nice for once. She was always good to us and Dolly. Twelve dollars wasn't too much for all she's done." Her eye was on her husband, and she was speaking more to him than to me.

"It cost sixteen," he corrected her. "I work all day for sixteen dollars take-home. But I'm not kicking. She *was* a good friend to Dolly."

His wife took up the sentiment and breathed more life into it. "She was *wonderful* to Dolly, a second mother. Remember when Dolly used to call her Aunt Izzie? Not every woman in Izzie Jaimet's position would permit that, but she's no snob. She gave our Dolly some of her happiest hours."

They clung to each other and to this warm fragment of the past. The icepick in her hand brought her back to the sharp present.

"How did you get ahold of this? I sent it to Mrs. Jaimet for a wedding gift. She doesn't even live in town any more."

"She used to live in town?"

"Right across the road," Stone said. "We were neighbors with the Jaimets for close to twenty years. She sold out to the Rowlands after Jaimet died, and moved to Santa Barbara. But Liz and her kept in touch. She even invited Liz to attend her wedding. Liz didn't go though. I convinced her she'd be out of place—"

His wife interrupted him: "Mr. Archer didn't come here to listen to a lot of ancient history." She said to me: "You haven't answered my question. Where did you get ahold of this?"

She shook the icepick at me. I held out my hand, and she relinquished it. I put it away in my pocket.

"I can't answer that question, Mrs. Stone."

"I've been answering *your* questions, all day and half the night."

"It hasn't been quite that bad. Still I'm sorry that I can't make things even with you. You'll find out soon enough what this is about."

"Is it the man they found across the road?"

I didn't affirm it or deny it. "This may be important to you personally. It may lead to a solution of Dolly's murder."

"I don't understand how."

"Neither do I. If I did, I wouldn't be here asking you questions. How well and how long did Mrs. Jaimet know Dolly?"

"All her life." She sat down suddenly on the chesterfield. The net of time had drawn tight on her face, cutting deep marks. "That is, until about three and a half years ago, when she moved to Santa Barbara. But it didn't stop then. She invited Dolly to come and visit her in Santa Barbara. I tried to talk Dolly into it—Mrs. Jaimet could do a lot for her—but Dolly never made the trip."

"How could Mrs. Jaimet do a lot for her?"

"The way she did do a lot for her. Mrs. Jaimet is an educated woman; her husband was the principal of the high school. She used to give Dolly books to read, and take her on picnics and all. I was working in those days, and she was a real good neighbor. She just loved Dolly. So if you're thinking she had anything to do with Dolly's death, you're 'way off the beam."

"'Way off the beam," her husband echoed. "She was like a second mother to Dolly, being she had no children of her own."

"Which was her secret sorrow. She never will have children now—she's too old."

Elizabeth Stone looked down at her own body. Jack Stone put his arm around her shoulders. She crossed her legs.

"Where can I get in touch with Mrs. Jaimet?"

"She's living in L.A. with her new husband. I ought to have her address some place. She remembered me with a card at Christmastime. I think I still have that card in the bureau." She started to get up, and froze in a leaning posture. "If I give you the address, you have to promise you won't tell her who gave it to you."

"I could promise, but it's bound to come out. Nearly everything does in the long run."

"Yeah, you have something there." She turned to her husband. "Jack, will you get it for me? It's in the top drawer of the bureau with the other special cards I saved—the one with the silver bells."

He rose quickly and left the room, and she subsided onto the chesterfield. Her baby-blue eyes were strained and speculative.

"The man across the road was stabbed with an icepick. It said so in the paper. The icepick you have there, the one I bought for Mrs. Jaimet's wedding—it couldn't be the one, could it?"

"Yes. It could be."

"I don't get it. How would a lady like her get mixed up in a killing?"

"Some of the darndest people do."

"But she's a real lady."

"What makes you so sure?"

"I may not be a lady myself, but I know one when I see one. Isobel Jaimet has class, the kind that doesn't have to flaunt itself. I happen to know she has very good connections. Matter of fact, she married one of them the second time around. Her second husband was her first husband's second cousin, if you can follow that. I met him years ago when he was staying with the Jaimets. He was very important in the military. The Jaimet family itself used to own the whole west side, before they lost it."

"What is her second husband's name?"

"Let's see, it's on the tip of my tongue. Anyway, it's on the card she sent me."

"Would it be Blackwell?"

"That's it! Blackwell. You know him?"

I didn't have to answer her. Her husband's slippered feet were clop-clopping down the stairs. He came into the room carrying a square envelope, which he handed to his wife. She opened it.

"Merry Christmas and Happy New Year," the bright card said. "Colonel and Mrs. Mark Blackwell."

chapter 25

SERGEANT LEONARD was waiting for me at the front of his house. He was wearing an eager expression, which sharpened when our eyes met under the light.

"Did they break down and confess?"

"They had nothing to confess. Elizabeth Stone bought the bar set as a wedding present for an old neighbor."

"It sounds like malarkey to me. They don't have the money to buy that kind of presents for the neighbors."

"They did, though."

"Who was the neighbor?"

"Mrs. Jaimet."

"Mrs. Ronald Jaimet? That's malarkey. She couldn't have had anything to do with this."

I would have liked to be able to agree with him. Since I couldn't, I said nothing.

"Why, her and her husband were two of our leading citizens," he said. "They had a front-page editorial in the paper when he died. He was a member of a pioneer county family and the best principal we ever had at the union high school."

"What did he die of?"

"He was a diabetic. He broke his leg in the Sierra and ran out of insulin before they could get him back to civilization. It was a great loss to the town, and just about as big a loss when Mrs. Jaimet moved away. She was the head of the Volunteer Family Service and half a dozen other organizations." He paused reflectively. "Did the Stones say where she is now?"

I lit a cigarette and considered my answer. Between my duty to the

law and a man who trusted me, and my duty to a client I no longer trusted, my ethics were stretched thin. Leonard repeated his question.

"I think they said she was married in Santa Barbara last year. You'd better talk to them yourself."

"Yeah. I better. In the morning." He scratched at his hairline. "It just came to my mind, the Jaimets lived right across the road from the Stones. We found Simpson buried right spang in their back yard, their use-to-was back yard. What do you make of that?"

"I don't like it," I said honestly, and changed the subject before he could ask me further questions. "I have that coat in the car if you want to look it over."

"Yeah. Bring it in."

I spread it out on the carpet in his living room. While I told him what I knew of its history, he was down on his knees, examining it inside and out.

"Too bad there's no cleaners' marks," he said. "But we may be able to trace the ownership through these Cruttworth people in Toronto. Another long trip for somebody."

"I'm getting used to long trips."

Leonard rose with his hands in the small of his back, then got down on his knees beside the coat again.

"Sometimes," he said, "the older-established cleaners put their marks inside the sleeves."

He turned back the right cuff. Several code letters and figures were written in indelible ink in the lining: BX1207. He stood up smiling.

"It's a lucky thing I looked."

"Do you recognize the mark, Sergeant?"

"No, it isn't local. But we can trace it. I know an officer in L.A. who has a pretty complete collection of these marks."

"Sam Garlick."

"You know Sam too, do you? We'll get to work on it first thing in the morning. You may not have to go to Toronto after all."

I left the coat with Leonard and went back to Bel Air. The Blackwell house had lights in it, and there was a taxi standing in the drive. The sound of my feet in the gravel woke the driver. He looked at me as if I might be about to hold him up.

"It's a nice night," I said.

"Uh-huh."

"Who are you waiting for?"

"A fare. Any objections?" His broken sleep had made him a little surly. He had a seamed dark face, and the eyes of a loner.

"I have no objections."

He said with aggressive politeness: "If I'm in your way I can move. Just say the word."

"You're not in my way. What happened, brother—did a bear bite you?"

"I don't like these long waits. These dames have no consideration. She must of been in there nearly an hour." He looked at his watch. "Over an hour."

"Who is she?"

"I dunno. Some big blonde dame in a leopard coat. I picked her up in Santa Monica."

"Is she old or young?"

"She isn't young. You ask a lot of questions."

"I'll bet you two dollars you didn't pick her up at the Santa Monica Inn."

"You lose. Are you her husband?"

"A friend." I gave him two dollars and went back to my car. We sat and had a waiting competition which lasted another fifteen or twenty minutes. Then the front door opened.

Pauline Hatchen backed out saying good night to Isobel Blackwell. I had a good look at Isobel before she closed the door. She was fully and formally dressed in a dark suit. Her heavy make-up didn't entirely hide her pallor or the patches of funeral crepe under her eyes. She didn't notice me.

I was waiting beside the cab when Pauline Hatchen reached it. "How are you, Mrs. Hatchen? I'm not as surprised to see you here as you might think. I got your call, and tried to return it."

"It's Mr. Archer. How nice." But she didn't sound too happy. "I've been wanting to talk to you again. It was one of my main reasons for coming back. The other night, in Ajijic, I didn't truly *realize* the situation. I suppose I'm what they call slow on the uptake."

"Did you fly in?"

"Yes. Today." She looked around at the large and quiet night. The lights in the Blackwell house were going out progressively. "Is there somewhere we can go and talk?"

"Will my car do? I prefer not to leave here right now. I want to see Isobel before she goes back to bed."

"I suppose it will have to do." She turned to the driver. "Do you mind waiting a few more minutes?"

"It's your time, ma'am. You're paying for it."

We walked back to my car. She seemed very tired, so tired that she had forgotten her self-consciousness. She leaned on my arm, and let

me help her into the lighted front seat. Her leopard coat was genuine but shabby. She pulled it around her not inelegant legs, and I shut the door.

I sat behind the wheel. "You want to talk about Harriet."

"Yes. Is there any word from her? Anything at all?"

"Nothing that will give you any comfort."

"So Isobel said. I thought perhaps she was holding back on me. She's always been a great one for deciding what other people ought to know. And I had the very devil of a time getting in touch with her. She'd gone to bed and refused to answer the phone. How any woman can *sleep* through a thing like this! But of course she's not Harriet's mother. That makes the difference. Blood is thicker than water."

She sounded like an algebra student quoting a formula which she was just learning how to apply.

"Do you know Isobel well?"

"I've known her for a long time. That isn't quite the same thing, is it? Her first husband, Ronald Jaimet, was Mark's cousin, and incidentally one of his best friends. Mark is a very family-minded man, and naturally we saw a good deal of the Jaimets. But Isobel and I were never close. I always felt she envied me my position as Mark's wife. Ronald was a decent-enough fellow, but he was nothing but a high-school teacher. He was one of those dedicated souls. Perhaps his diabetes had something to do with it."

"Do you know anything about his death?"

"Not much. He had an accident in the mountains. Mark was with him at the time. Why don't you ask Mark?"

"Mark isn't available. Or is he?"

"No, he's not here. According to Isobel, he's gone up to Tahoe." She leaned toward me, and her clothes emitted a gust of perfume. "Just what is the situation up there, Mr. Archer?"

"I haven't been in touch with it today. They're searching for Harriet, of course. She was last seen there, and a bloodstained hat belonging to her was found in the water. I found it myself."

"Does that mean she's been killed?"

"I keep hoping it doesn't. All we can do is hope."

"You think Harriet's dead." Her voice was low and dull. "Did Burke Damis kill her?"

"He says he didn't."

"But what would he have to gain?"

"Not all murders are for profit."

We sat in close silence, listening to each other breathe. I was keenly

aware of her, not so much as a woman, but as a fellow creature who had begun to feel pain. She had lost her way to the happy ending and begun to realize the consequences of the sealed-off past.

"You came a long way to ask me a few questions, Mrs. Hatchen. I'm sorry I can't give you better answers."

"It isn't your fault. And it wasn't just to ask questions that I came back. I heard from Harriet, you see. It brought home to me—"

"You heard from Harriet? When?"

"Yesterday, but please don't get your hopes up. She wrote the letter last Sunday, before this thing erupted. It was a very touching little letter. It made me see myself, and Harriet, in quite a new light."

"What did she have to say?"

"I can't repeat it verbatim, though I must have read it a dozen times on the plane. You can read it yourself if you like."

I turned on the overhead light. She rummaged in her leopard bag and produced a crumpled airmail envelope. It was addressed to Mrs. Keith Hatchen, Apartado Postal 89, Ajijic, Jalisco, Mexico, and had been postmarked in Pacific Palisades the previous Monday morning at 9:42. The envelope contained a single sheet crowded with writing. The first few lines slanted up to the right; the rest slanted down increasingly, so that the concluding lines were at a thirty-degree angle from the bottom of the page.

Dear Mother,

This is a difficult letter to write because we've never talked to one another as woman to woman (all my fault) and it was stupid and childish of me to leave without saying good-by. I was afraid (it seems I'm always afraid of something, doesn't it?) you would disapprove of me and Burke, and that I couldn't bear. He's my moon and stars, my great brilliant moon and my cruel bright stars. You didn't know I had such feelings, did you? Well, I do. I love him and I'm going to marry him, I don't care what Mark says. When I'm with Him I feel quite different from my ordinary sad shy self (alliteration's artful aid!)—he's a Prince, a dark Prince, who fits crystal slippers on my Cinderella feet and teaches me to dance to music I never heard before—the music of the spheres. When he touches me the dead cold world comes alive, dead cold Harriet comes alive.

That sounds like gibberish, doesn't it, but believe me I mean every word of it, but I will try to write more calmly. I need your help, Mother. I know I can count on you, in spite of all the wasted years between us. You have known passion and suffered for it—

but here I am going on again like a nineteenth-century romance. The point is, we need money and we need it right away if we are to get married. Burke is in some sort of trouble (nothing serious) and I should never have brought him back to this country. We plan to fly to South America—keep this under your hat!—if we can get the money, and you are the only one we can turn to. Mark is no help at all. He hates Burke, I even think he hates me, too. He says he'll hire detectives to stop the wedding! Since he is one of the controllers of Aunt Ada's trust, I can't do anything in that direction until I'm twenty-five. So I am asking you to lend me five thousand dollars till January. If you will do this please have it ready for me and I will get in touch with you when we reach Mexico. We have enough money to reach Mexico.

Dear Mother, please do this. It's the only thing I've ever asked of you. It's the only thing I ask of life, that Burke and I have a chance to be happy together. If I can't have him, I'll die.

Your loving daughter,
Harriet.

I folded the letter along its creases and tucked it into the envelope. Mrs. Hatchen watched me as if it was a live thing which I might injure.

"It's a strangely beautiful letter, isn't it?"

"It didn't strike me in quite that way. I'm not too crazy about some of the implications. Harriet wasn't thinking too well when she wrote it."

"What do you expect?" she said defensively. "The poor girl was under great strain. She'd just had a fearful battle with her father—Isobel told me something about it. Harriet was fighting for everything she holds dear."

"So was Campion. Everything that he holds dear seems to be five thousand dollars."

"Campion?"

"Campion is Burke Damis's real name. He's in jail in Redwood City at the moment. What about the five thousand dollars, Mrs. Hatchen? Would you have been willing to lend it to her?"

"Yes. I still am, if she is alive to use it. I brought it with me. Keith and I went into Guadalajara yesterday afternoon and took it out of the bank. It's part of my settlement from Mark, and Keith had no real objection."

"I hope you're not carrying it around."

"It's in the safe at the hotel."

"Leave it there. Harriet certainly won't be needing it. I don't believe it was her idea, anyway." I turned to look at her under the light.

"You're a generous woman, Mrs. Hatchen. I took you for something different."

"I am something different." She narrowed her eyes and drew down the corners of her mouth. "Please turn off the light and don't look at me. I'm an ugly old woman, trying to buy back the past. But I came back here about fifteen years too late. I had no right to leave Harriet. Her life would have turned out better if I'd stayed."

"You can't be sure of that." I switched off the light, and noticed that all the lights in the Blackwell house had gone out. "Do you mind telling me just why you left Mark Blackwell? Did it have anything to do with Isobel?"

"No, he wasn't interested in her. He wasn't interested in any woman, and that includes me." Her voice had become harsher and deeper. "Mark was a mother's boy. I know that sounds like a peculiar statement to make about a professional military man. Unfortunately it's true. His mother was the widow of the late Colonel, who was killed in the First War, and Mark was her only son, and she really lavished herself on him, if 'lavish' is the word. 'Ravish' may be closer.

"She spent the first years of our marriage with us, and I had to sit in the background and watch him dance to her tune, playing skip-rope with the silver cord. It's a common story—I've heard it from other women, in and out of the service. You marry them because they're idealistic and make no passes. The trouble is, they stay that way. Mark was like a little boy in bed. You'll never know the contortions I had to go through to get a child. But we won't go into that.

"When his mother died, I thought he'd turn to me. I was a dreamer. He transferred his fixation—yes, I've talked to the doctors—he transferred his fixation to poor little Harriet. It's a terrible thing to see a person converting another person into a puppet, a kind of zombie. He supervised her reading, her games, her friends, even her thoughts. He made her keep a diary, which he read, and when he was away on duty she had to send it to him. He got her so confused that she didn't know whether she was a girl or a boy, or if he was her father or her lover.

"He was worse than ever after the war, when he got back from Germany. The war was a disappointment to Mark; it didn't do what he'd hoped for his career. Actually he only chose that career because it was a family tradition and his mother insisted on it. I think he would have been happier doing almost anything else. But by the time they retired him, he thought it was too late to start something new. And he had money, so he didn't have to. There's always been scads of money in the family, and he could afford to spend all his time on Harriet. He conceived the grand idea of turning her into a sort of boy-girl who would make everything

come right in the end for him. He taught her to shoot and climb mountains and play polo. He even took to calling her Harry.

"It sickened me. I'm not the aggressive type, and I'd always been afraid of him—you get that way living with a man you don't love. But I finally forced a showdown. I told him I would divorce him if he didn't get some help, psychiatric help. Naturally he thought I was the one who was crazy—he couldn't afford to think otherwise. Maybe I was, to stay with him for twelve years. He told me to go ahead and divorce him, that he and Harriet were enough for each other. She was only eleven years old at the time. I wanted to take her with me, but Mark said he would fight me to the limit. I couldn't afford a court battle. Don't ask why. Everything catches up with you in the end. So I lost my daughter, and now she's really lost."

We sat and let the darkness soak into our bones. I tried to relieve it.

"There's a small chance that Harriet's all right," I said. "She and Campion may have decided to travel separately. It would account for his refusal to say what happened to her. She may turn up in Mexico after all."

"But you don't really think she will?"

"No. It's just one of several possibilities. The others aren't so pleasant to contemplate."

There was a stir of life in the cab ahead. The driver got out and slouched toward us.

"You said a few minutes, ma'am. I don't mind waiting if I know how long I got to wait. It's this uncertainty that makes me nervous."

"Things are rough all over," I said.

"I was speaking to the lady." But he went back to his cab.

Mrs. Hatchen opened the door on her side. "I've kept you longer than I meant to. You said you wanted to talk to Isobel."

"Yes."

"Do you think she knows something she hasn't told?"

"People nearly always do," I said. "It's why I have a hard life, and an interesting one."

She reached for the letter, which was still in my hand. "I'd like that back if you don't mind. It's very important to me."

"I'm sorry. The police will have to see it. I'll try to get it back to you eventually. Will you be staying at the Santa Monica Inn?"

"I don't know. Isobel asked me to stay with her, but that's impossible."

"Why?"

"We don't get along. We never have. She thinks I'm a silly flibbertigibbet. Maybe I am. *I* think *she* is a hypocrite."

"I'd be interested in your reasons."

"They're simple enough. Isobel has always pretended to despise

money and the things it can buy. Plain living and high thinking was her motto. But I notice she grabbed Mark and his money the first good chance she got. Please don't quote me to Isobel. In fact, you better not tell her that you saw me."

I said I wouldn't. "One more question, Mrs. Hatchen. What happens to Ada's trust fund if Harriet doesn't live to enjoy it?"

"I suppose it reverts to Mark. Nearly everything does."

chapter 26

THE MAID reluctantly let me in. I waited in the hallway, counting the pieces in the parquetry and wishing that I had never seen Isobel Blackwell, or taken her money, or liked her. She finally appeared, wearing the same dark suit and the same dark patches under her eyes. Her movements were carefully controlled, as if she was walking a line.

She said with unsmiling formality: "I hope the importance of your news justifies this late-night visit."

"It does. Can we sit down?"

She took me into the drawing room, under the eyes of the ancestors. I said to them as well as to her: "I'm doing you a favor coming here. If you weren't my client, there'd be policemen instead, and reporters trampling the roses."

"Am I supposed to understand that?" Her speech was slurred, and her eyes had a drugged look. "If I am, you'll have to explain it to me. And please bear in mind that I may not be thinking too clearly —I'm full of chloral hydrate. Now what were you saying about policemen and newspapermen?"

"They'll be here tomorrow. They'll be wanting to know, among other things, if you have an icepick with a square-cut silver handle."

"We do have, yes. I haven't seen it lately, but I assume it's somewhere in the kitchen, or one of the portable bars."

"I can tell you now it isn't. It's in the hands of Sergeant Wesley Leonard of the Citrus County Sheriff's Department."

I was watching her closely, and she seemed genuinely perplexed. "Are you trying to threaten me in some way? You sound as though you were."

"The word is warn, Mrs. Blackwell."

Her voice sharpened. "Has something happened to Mark?"

"Something has happened to Ralph Simpson and Dolly Stone. I think both those people were known to you."

"Dolly Stone? I haven't even seen the girl in years."

"I hope you can prove that, because Dolly was murdered last May."

She lowered her head and moved it from side to side, as if she was trying to dodge the fact. "You must be joking." She stole a look at my face and saw that I was not. "How? How was she murdered?"

"She was strangled, by unknown hands."

Isobel Blackwell looked at her hands. They were slender and well kept, but the knuckles suggested a history of work. She massaged the knuckles, as if she might be trying to erase the history.

"You surely can't imagine that I had anything to do with it. I had no idea that Dolly was dead. I *was* quite close to her at one time—she was virtually my foster daughter—but that was years ago."

"She was your foster daughter?"

"That may be putting it too strongly. Dolly was one of my projects. The Stones lived across the road from us, and I couldn't help noticing the beginnings of antisocial tendencies in the child. I did my best to provide her with an example and steer her clear of delinquency." Her voice was cool and careful. "Did I fail?"

"Somebody failed. You sound a little like a social worker, Mrs. Blackwell."

"I was one before I married my first husband."

"Ronald Jaimet."

She raised her brows. Under them, her eyes appeared strangely naked. "Suddenly you know a great deal about my affairs."

"Suddenly your affairs are at the center of this case. When I found out tonight that you knew Dolly Stone and her parents, it knocked most of my ideas sideways. I'm trying to work up a new set of ideas, and I can't do it without your co-operation."

"I'm still very much in the dark. I'm not even sure what case we're talking about."

"It's all one case," I said, "Harriet's disappearance and Dolly's death and the murder of Ralph Simpson, who was stabbed with an icepick —"

"*My* icepick?"

"That's the police hypothesis. I share it. I'm not accusing you of doing the actual stabbing."

"How good of you."

"The fact remains that you knew Ralph Simpson, you were almost certainly aware of his death, and you said nothing about it."

"Is this the same Ralph Simpson who worked for us at Tahoe in the spring?"

"The same. A day or two after he left you he was stabbed to death and buried in the back yard of the house you used to own in Citrus Junction."

"But that's insane, utterly insane."

"You knew about it, didn't you?"

"I did not. You're quite mistaken."

"There's an account of the Simpson killing on the front page of the Citrus Junction paper in your sitting room."

"I haven't read it. I take the paper, to keep track of old friends, but I'm afraid I seldom look at it. I haven't even glanced at it this week."

I couldn't tell if she was lying. Her face had become a stiff mask which refused to tell what went on in the mind behind it. Her eyes had veiled themselves. Guilt can effect those changes. So can innocent fear.

"You have sharp eyes, don't you, Mr. Archer? Unfriendly eyes."

"Objective eyes, I hope."

"I'm not fond of your objectivity. I thought there was a degree of confidence between us."

"There was."

"You put that emphatically in the past tense. Since you've been operating with my money, operating on *me* in fact, I would have expected a little more tolerance, and sympathy. You realize my connection with Dolly proves nothing whatever against me."

"I'd be glad to see that proved."

"How can I prove it?"

"Tell me more about Dolly. For instance, what were the antisocial tendencies you noticed in her?"

"Must I? I've only just learned of her death. It's distressing to rake over the past under the circumstances."

"The past is the key to the present."

"You're quite a philosopher," she said with some irony.

"I'm simply a detective with quite a few murder cases under my belt. People start out young on the road to becoming murderers. They start out equally young on the road to becoming victims. When the two roads intersect, you have a violent crime."

"Are you suggesting that Dolly was a predestined victim?"

"Not predestined, but prepared. What prepared her, Mrs. Blackwell?"

"*I* didn't, if that's what you're thinking." She paused, and took a deep breath. "Very well, I'll try to give you a serious answer. I *was* concerned about Dolly, from the time she was four or five. She wasn't relating too well to other children. Her relationship with adults wasn't right, either, and it got worse. It showed up particularly in her contacts with my

husband. Dolly was a pretty little thing, and her father had treated her seductively and then rejected her. It's a common pattern. The Stones aren't bad people, but they're ignorant people, lacking in insight. They were our good neighbors, however, and Ronald and I believed in helping our neighbors as best we could. We tried to provide Dolly with a more normal family constellation—"

"And yourselves with a daughter?"

"That's an unkind remark." Her anger showed through her mask. She forced it back. "It's true, we couldn't have children; Ronald had a diabetic condition. I'm also aware of the ease with which good white magic turns into bad black magic. But we made no attempt to take Dolly from her parents, emotionally or otherwise. We merely tried to give her some things they couldn't—books and music and recreation and the company of understanding people."

"Then your husband died, and you moved away."

"I'd already lost her by that time," she said defensively. "It wasn't I who failed Dolly. She'd begun to steal money from my purse and lie about it, and she did other things I prefer not to go into. She's dead: *nil nisi bonum*."

"I wish you would go into the other things."

"I'll put it this way. I wasn't able to protect her against degrading influences—I only had a part of her life after all. She ran with the wrong crowd in high school and picked up gutter ideas of sex. Dolly was already mature at the age of fifteen."

She didn't go on. Her mouth was grave, her eyes watchful. It was possible, I thought, that Dolly had made a play for Ronald Jaimet before he died. It was possible that Jaimet had fallen for it. A daughterless man in middle age can take a sudden fall, all the way down to the bottom of the hole. It would be a suicidal hole, but suicide came easily to a diabetic. He simply had to forget his dose and his diet.

Being a murder victim came easily to a diabetic, too.

"You have that look again." Isobel Blackwell said. "That objective look, as you call it. I hope I'm not the object of your thoughts."

"In a way you are. I was thinking about Ronald Jaimet's death."

"Apparently you've come here tonight determined to spare me nothing. If you must know, Ronald died by accident. And incidentally, since I think I know what's on your mind, Ronald's relations with Dolly were pure—wonderfully pure. I knew Ronald."

"I didn't. What were the circumstances of his death? I understand Mark was with him."

"They were on a pack trip in the Sierra. Ronald fell and broke his ankle. What was worse, he broke his insulin needle. By the time Mark got

him down the hill to Bishop, he was in a coma. He died in the Bishop hospital, before I could get to him."

"So you have the story from Mark."

"It's the truth. Ronald and Mark were good friends as well as cousins. Ronald was the younger of the two, and he'd always admired Mark. I could never have married Mark if that hadn't been the case."

Under the increasing pressure of my questions, she seemed to feel the need to justify the main actions of her life. I brought her back to Ronald Jaimet's death.

"Diabetics don't usually go on pack trips in the mountains. Aren't they supposed to lead a fairly sheltered life?"

"Some of them do. Ronald couldn't. I realize, I realized then, that it was risky for him to expose himself to accidents. But I couldn't bring myself to try and stop him. His annual hike was important to him, as a man. And Mark was there to look after him."

I sat for a minute and listened to the echoes of her last sentence. Perhaps she was hearing them, too.

"How did Ronald happen to take a spill?"

"He slipped and fell on a steep trail." She jerked her head sideways as if to deflect the image of his fall. "Please don't try to tell me that it was accident-proneness or unconscious suicide. I've been over all that in my mind many times. Ronald had a great sense of life, in spite of his illness. He was happy in his life. I made him happy."

"I'm sure you did."

She went on stubbornly, justifying her life and its meanings: "And please don't try to tell me that Mark had anything to do with Ronald's death. The two men were deeply fond of each other. Mark was like an older brother to Ronald. He carried him on his back for miles over rugged trails, back to the jeep. It took him most of a day and a night to bring him down the hill. When Harriet and I finally reached the hospital—she drove me up to Bishop that day—Mark was completely broken up. He blamed himself for not taking better care of Ronald. So you see, you're wandering far afield when you suggest that Mark—"

"The suggestion came from you, Mrs. Blackwell."

"No, it was you."

"I'm sorry, but you brought it up."

"I did?" She dragged her fingers diagonally across her face, pressing her eyes closed, drawing down one corner of her mouth. Her lipstick was smeared like blood there. "You're probably right. I'm very tired, and confused. I only have about half a lobe working."

"It's the chloral hydrate," I said, thinking that the drug had some of the properties of a truth serum.

"It's partly that and partly other things. Before you arrived, I had a very wearing hour with Harriet's mother. Pauline flew all the way from Guadalajara to find out what had happened. I didn't know she had so much maternal feeling."

"What went on in that hour?"

"Nothing, really. She seems to blame me for the family trouble, and I suppose I blame her. Someday, in the brave new world, we'll all stop blaming each other."

She tried to smile, and the faltering movement of her mouth charmed me. I would have preferred not to be charmed by her.

"Someday," I said, "I can stop asking questions. As it stands, I have to go on asking them. What kind of a houseboy was Ralph Simpson?"

"Adequate, I suppose. He worked for us such a short time, it's hard to say. I don't like using servants, anyway, which is why we have only the one living in. I'm accustomed to doing things for myself."

"Is that why Simpson was fired?"

"Mark thought he was too familiar. Mark likes to be treated as a superior being; Ralph Simpson was very democratic. I rather liked it. I'm not really used to the stuffy life." She glanced up at the ancestors.

"I heard a rumor at Tahoe that Ralph was fired for stealing."

"Stealing what, for heaven's sake?"

"It may have been a topcoat," I said carefully. "When Ralph got home from the lake, he had a man's topcoat which he told his wife was given him. It was brown Harris tweed with woven brown leather buttons. One of the buttons was missing. Do you know anything about the coat?"

"No. Obviously you do."

"Did your husband ever buy clothes in Toronto?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Has he ever been in Toronto?"

"Of course, many times. We passed through there on our honeymoon last fall."

"This coat was bought from a Toronto firm named Crutt-worth. Did your husband have dealings there?"

"I couldn't say. Why is this topcoat so important to you?"

"I'll tell you if you'll let me look at your husband's clothes."

She shook her head. "I couldn't possibly, without his permission."

"When do you expect him back?"

"I don't believe he'll leave Tahoe until Harriet is found."

"Then he may be there for a long time. The chances are better than even that she's dead and buried like Ralph Simpson, or sunk in the lake."

Her face was ugly with dismay. "You think Burke Damis did this to her?"

"He's the leading suspect."

"But it isn't possible. He couldn't have."

"That's his contention, too."

"You've talked to him?"

"I ran him down last night. He's in custody in Redwood City. I thought that was going to close the case, but it didn't. The case keeps opening up, and taking in more people and more territory. The connections between the people keep multiplying. Damis's real name is Campion, as you may know, and he married Dolly Stone last September. She had a child in March, and two months later she was strangled. Campion was the main suspect in her death."

"That's incredible."

"What I find hard to believe, Mrs. Blackwell, is that you were totally unaware of all this."

"But I was. I hadn't been in touch with Dolly."

"There has to be a further connection, though. You see that. Bruce Campion alias Burke Damis married your one-time foster daughter last year. This year he planned to marry your stepdaughter, with your support, and got as far as eloping with her. Coincidences come large sometimes, but I'm not buying that one."

She said in a small voice: "You're really suspicious of me."

"I have to be. You tried to keep me off Campion's back. You promoted his marriage to Harriet."

"Only because she had no one else. I was afraid of what would happen to her, to her emotions, if she went on being so bitterly lonely."

"Perhaps you were playing God with her, the way you did with Dolly? Perhaps you met Campion through Dolly, and put him up to marrying Harriet?"

"I swear I never saw him before he came to this house last Saturday night. I admit I rather liked him. People make mistakes. I seem to have made a mistake about you as well."

Her look was complexly female, asking me for renewed assurances of loyalty and fealty. Under the threat of the situation she was using all her brains now, and the full range of her temperament. I guessed that she was defending herself, or something just as dear to her as herself.

"Anyway," she said, "what possible advantage could I derive from serving as a marriage broker to Mr. Damis-Campion?"

The question was rhetorical, but I had answers for it. "If your husband disinherited Harriet, or if she was killed, you could inherit everything he has. If Harriet and your husband were killed, in that order, you could inherit everything they both have."

"My husband is very much alive."

"At last report he is."

"I love my husband. I won't say I loved Harriet, but I cared for her."

"You loved your first husband, too, and you survived him."

Tears started in her eyes. She made an effort of will which contorted her face, and cut the tears off at the source. "You can't believe these things about me. You're just saying them."

"I'm not saying them for fun. We've had two murders, or three, or four. Ralph Simpson and Dolly, Harriet, Ronald Jaimet. All of the victims were known to you; three were close."

"But we don't know that Harriet has been murdered. Ronald definitely was not. I told you the circumstances of Ronald's death."

"I heard what you told me."

"My husband will confirm my account, in detail. Don't you believe it?"

"At this point I'd be silly to commit myself."

"What kind of a woman do you think I am?" Her eyes were intent on mine, with a kind of scornful ardor.

"I'm trying to develop an answer to that question."

"I don't admire your methods. They're a combination of bullying and blackmail and insulting speculation. You're trying to make me out a liar and a cheat, perhaps even a murderer. I'm none of those things."

"I hope you're not. The facts are what they are. I don't know all of them yet. I don't know you."

"I thought you liked me, that we liked each other."

"I do. But that's my problem."

"Yet you treat me without sympathy, without feeling."

"It's cleaner that way. I have a job to do."

"But you're supposed to be working for me."

"True. I've been expecting you to fire me any minute."

"Is that what you want?"

"It would free my hand. You can't pull me off the case—I guess you know that. It's my case and I'll finish it on my own time if I have to."

"You seem to be using a great deal of my time, too. And as for freeing your hand, I have the impression that your hand is already excessively free. I can feel the lacerations, Mr. Archer."

Her voice was brittle, but she had recovered her style. That bothered me, too. Chloral hydrate or no, an innocent woman holding nothing back wouldn't have sat still for some of the things I had said. She'd have slapped my face or screamed or burst into tears or fainted or left the room or ordered me out. I almost wished that one or several of these things had happened.

"At least you're feeling pain," I said. "It's better than being anaesthetized and not knowing where the knife is cutting you."

"You conceive of yourself as a surgeon? Perhaps I should call you doctor."

"I'm not the one holding the knife. I'm not the one, either, who took your silver icepick and stabbed Ralph Simpson with it."

"I trust you've relinquished the idea that it was I."

"You're the most likely suspect. It's time you got that through your head. You knew Simpson, it was your icepick, it was your old stamping ground where he was buried."

"You don't have to get rough," she said in a rough voice. Her voice was as mutable as any I'd ever heard.

"This is a picnic compared with what you're going to have for breakfast. I kept the police out of your hair tonight by suppressing your present name and whereabouts—"

"You did that for me?"

"You are my client, after all. I wanted to give you a chance to clear yourself. You haven't used the chance."

"I see." A grim look settled like age on her mouth. "What was my motive for stabbing Ralph Simpson and burying him in the yard of our old house?"

"Self-protection of one kind or another. Most murderers think they're protecting themselves against some kind of threat."

"But why did I bury him in the yard of our house? That doesn't make any sense, does it?"

"You could have arranged to meet him there, knowing the house was empty, and killed him on the spot."

"That's a pretty picture. Why would I rendezvous with a man like Ralph Simpson?"

"Because he knew something about you."

"And what would that delightful something be?"

"It could have to do with the death of Dolly Stone Campion."

"Are you accusing me of murdering her?"

"I'm asking you."

"What was my motive?"

"I'm asking you."

"Ask away. You'll get no further answers from me."

Her eyes were bright and hard, but the grinding interchange had hurt her will. Her mouth was tremulous.

"I think I will, Mrs. Blackwell. A queer thing occurred the night Dolly was murdered—queer when you look at it in relation to murder. When the strangler had done his strangling, he, or she, noticed that Dolly's baby was in the room. Perhaps the child woke up crying. The average criminal would take to his heels when that happened. This one didn't. He, or she, went to

some trouble and ran considerable risk to put the child where he'd be found and looked after. He, or she, picked up the baby and carried him down the road to a neighbor's house and left him in a car."

"This is all new to me. I don't even know where the murder took place."

"Near Luna Bay in San Mateo County."

"I've never even been there."

I threw a question at her from left field: "The Travelers Motel in Saline City—have you been there?"

"Never." Her eyes didn't change.

"Getting back to the night of Dolly's murder, a woman might think of the child's safety at such a time. So might the child's father. I'm reasonably sure it wasn't Campion. Are you willing to discuss the possible identity of the child's father?"

"I have nothing to contribute."

"I have, Mrs. Blackwell. We have evidence suggesting that the strangler was wearing the Harris tweed topcoat I mentioned. Apparently one of the buttons was loose, about to fall off. The baby got hold of it when the murderer was carrying him down the road. The neighbor woman found the brown leather button in the baby's fist." I paused, and went on: "You see why the identification of that topcoat is crucial."

"Where is the topcoat now?"

"The police have it, as I said. They'll be showing it to you tomorrow. Are you certain you've never seen one like it? Are you certain that your husband didn't buy a coat from Crutt-worth's in Toronto?"

Her eyes had changed now. They were large and unfocused, looking a long way past me. Under her smudged makeup the skin around her mouth had a bluish tinge, as if my hammering questions had literally bruised her. She got to her feet, swaying slightly, and ran out of the room on awkward high heels.

I followed her. The threat of violence, of homicide or suicide, had been gathering in the house for days. She flung herself along the hallway and through the master bedroom into a bathroom. I heard her being sick there in the dark.

A light was on in the great bedroom. I opened one of the wardrobe closets and found Mark Blackwell's clothes. He had a couple of dozen suits, hanging in a row like thin and docile felons.

I turned back the right cuff of one of the jackets. Written in the lining in indelible ink was the same cleaner's code that Leonard had found in the sleeve of the topcoat: BX1207.

chapter 27

THE MAID APPEARED in the doorway. She was back in uniform but still using her unzipped personality.

"Now what?"

"Mrs. Blackwell is ill. You'd better see to her."

She crossed the bedroom to the dark bathroom, dragging her feet a little. I waited until I heard the two women's voices. Then I made my way back through the house to the telephone I had used before. The Citrus Junction paper with the Simpson story on the front page lay untouched on Isobel Blackwell's desk. If she had guilty knowledge of it, I thought wishfully, she would have hidden or destroyed the newspaper.

Arnie Walters answered his phone with a grudging "Hello."

"This is Archer. Have you seen Blackwell?"

He ignored the question. "It's about time you checked in, Lew. I heard you took Campion last night—"

"I want to know if you've seen Mark Blackwell, Harriet's father."

"No. Was I supposed to?"

"He set out early Thursday morning for Tahoe, at least that was his story. Check with the people there, will you, and call me back. I'm at Blackwell's house in L.A. You know the number."

"Is he on the missing list, too?"

"Voluntary missing, maybe."

"Too bad you can't keep track of your clients. Have they all flipped?"

"Everybody's doing it. It's the new freedom."

"Stop trying to be funny. You wake me up in the middle of the night, and you don't even tell me what Campion had to say."

"He denies everything. I'm inclined to believe him."

"He can't deny the blood on the hat. It's Harriet's blood type, and she was last seen with him. He can't deny the murder of his wife."

"That was a bum beef, Arnie."

"You know that for a fact?"

"A semi-fact, anyway. Campion's no Eagle Scout, but it looks as though somebody made a patsy out of him."

"Who?"

"I'm working on it."

"Then what's your theory about Harriet? She's vanished without a trace."

"She may have met with foul play after Campion left her. She was carrying money and driving a new car. We ought to bear down on finding that car. One place to look would be the airport parking lots at Reno and San Francisco."

"You think she flew some place?"

"It's a possibility. Look into it, will you, but call me back right away on Blackwell. I have to know if the Tahoe authorities have seen him."

Isobel Blackwell spoke behind me as I hung up: "Do you doubt everything and everyone?"

She had washed her face and left it naked of make-up. Her hair was wet at the temples.

"Practically everything," I said. "Almost everyone. It's a little habit I picked up from my clients by osmosis."

"Not from me. I've never learned the habit of distrust."

"Then it's time you did. You've been deliberately cutting yourself off from the facts of life, and death, while all hell has been breaking loose around you."

"At least you believe I'm innocent."

She came all the way into the room and sat in the chair I'd vacated, turning it sideways and resting her head on her hand. She had drenched herself with cologne. I stood over her with the distinct feeling that she had come to place herself in my power or under my protection.

"Innocence is a positive thing, Mrs. Blackwell. It doesn't consist in holding back information out of a misplaced sense of loyalty. Or shutting your eyes while people die—"

"Don't lecture me." She moved her head sideways as though I'd pushed her. "What kind of woman do you think I am? I've asked you that before."

"I think we're both in the process of finding out."

"I already know, and I'll tell you. I'm an unlucky woman. I've known it for many years, since the man I loved told me he was diabetic and couldn't or shouldn't have children. When he died it confirmed my un-

luck. I made up my mind never to marry anyone or love anyone again. I refused to expose myself to suffering. I'd had it.

"I moved to Santa Barbara and went on schedule. My schedule was chock full of all the activities a widowed woman is supposed to fill up her time with—garden tours and bridge and adult education classes in mosaic work. I got myself to the point where I was reasonably content and hideously bored. I forgot about my basic unluck, and that was my mistake.

"Mark came to me late last summer and told me that he needed me. He was in trouble. My heart, or whatever, went out to him. I allowed myself to feel needed once again. I'd always been fond of Mark and his blundering boyish ways. That may sound like a queer description of him, but it's the Mark I know, the only one I've known. At any rate I married him and here I am."

She turned her head up to meet my eyes. The tendons in her neck were like wires in a taut cable. An obscure feeling for her moved me. If it was pity, it changed to something better. I wanted to touch her face. But there were still too many things unsaid.

"If you've been unlucky," she said, "you become unwilling to move for fear the whole house will come tumbling down."

"It's lying in pieces around you now, Mrs. Blackwell."

"I hardly need you to tell me that."

"Was Mark in trouble with a girl last summer?"

"Yes. He picked her up at Tahoe and got her pregnant. She was plaguing him for money, naturally. He didn't care about the money, but he was afraid she'd press for something more drastic. Marriage, perhaps, or a lawsuit that would ruin him in the public eye. What people think is very important to Mark. I suppose he thought that marriage to me would protect him and tend to silence the girl." Stubbornly, she refrained from naming her.

"Did he have the gall to spell this out to you?"

"Not in so many words. His motives are usually quite transparent. He gives himself away, especially when he's afraid. He was terribly afraid when he came to my house in Santa Barbara. The girl, or one of her friends, had threatened him with criminal charges. Apparently he'd driven her across the state line."

"Did you know the girl was Dolly Stone?"

"No." The word came out with retching force. "I'd never have married Mark—"

"Why did you marry him?"

"I was willing to feel needed, as I said. He certainly needed me, and so did Harriet. I thought a marriage that started badly couldn't fail to

improve. And Mark was so desperately afraid, and guilty. He believed he was on the moral skids, that he might end by molesting little children on the streets. He said I was the only one who could save him, and I believed him."

"You didn't save him from murdering Dolly. I think you know that by now."

"I've been afraid of it."

"How long have you suspected?"

"Just tonight, when we were talking about his topcoat, and I got sick. I'm not feeling very well now."

A greenish pallor had invaded her face, as though the light had changed. Without thinking about it, I touched her temple where the hair was wet. She leaned her head against my hand.

"I'm sorry you're not feeling well," I said. "You realize we have to go on to the end."

"I suppose we do. I lied to you about the topcoat, of course. He bought it when we were on our honeymoon—we ran into some cold weather in Toronto. Mark said it would come in handy when we went up to Tahoe in the spring. I suppose Ralph Simpson found it there, and brought it to Mark for an accounting. Mark took the icepick the Stones had given us—" Her voice broke. "These things are all mixed up with our marriage," she said. "You'd think he was trying to make a Black Mass of our wedding ceremony."

She shuddered. I found myself crouching with my arms around her, her tears wetting my collar. After a while the tears stopped coming. Later still she drew away from me.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to let my emotions go at your expense."

I touched the tragic hollow in her cheek. She turned away from my hand.

"Please. Thank you, but also please. I have to think of just one thing, and that's my duty to Mark."

"Isn't that pretty well washed out?"

She raised her eyes. "You've never been married, have you?"

"I have been."

"Well, you've never been a woman. I have to follow through on this marriage, no matter what Mark has done to it. For my sake as well as his." She hesitated. "Surely I won't have to stand up in court and testify about these things—the icepick, and the coat, and Dolly?"

"A wife can't be forced to testify against her husband. You probably know that from your social-working days."

"Yes. I'm not thinking too well. I'm still in shock, I guess. I feel as though I'd been stripped naked and was about to be driven through the streets."

"There will be bad publicity. It's one reason I had to get the facts from you tonight. I'd like to protect you as much as possible."

"You're a thoughtful man, Mr. Archer. But what can you do?"

"I can do your talking to the police for you, up to a point."

Her mind caught on the word police. "Did I understand from your telephone conversation just now that you're asking the Tahoe police to arrest Mark?"

"I asked a friend in Reno, a detective I've been using, to find out if your husband is up there. He's going to call me back."

"Then what?"

"Your husband will be arrested, if he's there. He may not be within five thousand miles of Tahoe."

"I'm sure he is. He was so concerned about Harriet."

"Or about his own skin."

She looked at me with sharp dislike.

"You might as well face this, too," I said. "There's a very good chance that your husband left here this morning with no intention of ever coming back. What time did he leave, by the way?"

"Early, very early. I wasn't up. He left me a note."

"Do you still have the note?"

She opened the top drawer of her desk and handed me a folded piece of stationery. The writing was a hasty scratching which I could hardly decipher:

Isobel,

I'm off to Tahoe. It is too grinding to sit and wait for news of Harriet. I must do something, anything. It's best you stay here at home. I'll see you when this is over. Please think of me with affection, as I do you.

Mark

"It could be a farewell note," I said.

"No. I'm sure he's gone to Tahoe. You'll see."

I dropped the subject, pending Arnie's call. Some time went by. I sat in a straight-backed chair by the French doors. The dark sky was turning pale. House lights pierced the emerging hills, like random substitutes for the fading stars.

Isobel Blackwell sat with her head on her arms. She was as quiet as a sleeper, but I knew by the rhythm of her breathing that she was awake.

"There's one thing I'd like to have clear," I said to her back. "Is it possible that Mark killed Ronald Jaimet?"

She pretended not to hear me. I repeated the question in the same

words and the same tone. She said without raising her head: "It isn't possible. They were dear friends. Mark went to enormous trouble to bring Ronald down from the high country. He was almost dead from exhaustion when he got to Bishop. He needed medical attention himself."

"That doesn't prove anything about the accident. Was there any indication that it was a planned accident?"

She turned on me fiercely. "There was not. What are you trying to do to me?"

I wasn't sure myself. There were obscure areas in the case, like blank spaces on a map. I wanted to fill them in. I also wanted to wean Isobel Blackwell away from her marriage before she went down the drain with it. I'd seen that happen to sensitive women who would rather die in a vaguely hopeful dream than live in the agonizing light of wakefulness.

I tried to tell her some of these things, but she cut me short.

"It's quite impossible. I know how Ronald died, and I know how Mark felt about it. He was completely broken up, as I told you."

"A murder can do that to a man. A first murder. Was Mark in love with you four years ago when Ronald died?"

"He most assuredly was not."

"Can you be certain?"

"I can be very certain. He was infatuated with—a girl."

"Dolly Stone?"

She nodded, slowly and dismally. "It wasn't what you think, not at that time. It was more of a father-daughter thing, the kind of relationship he had with Harriet when she was younger. He brought Dolly gifts when he came to visit us, he took her for little outings. She called him uncle."

"What happened on the little outings?"

"Nothing. Mark wouldn't sink that low—not with a young girl."

"You used the word 'infatuated.'"

"I shouldn't have. It was Ronald's word really. He took a much stronger view of it than I did."

"Ronald knew all about it then?"

"Oh yes. He was the one who put a stop to it."

"How?"

"He talked to Mark. I wasn't in on the proceedings, but I know they weren't pleasant. However, their friendship survived."

"But Ronald didn't."

She got to her feet blazing with anger. "You have a vile imagination and a vicious tongue."

"That may be. We're not talking about imaginary things. Did the Dolly issue come up shortly before Ronald's death?"

"I refuse to discuss this any further."

The telephone punctuated her refusal. It buzzed like a rattlesnake beside her; she started as though it was one. I walked around her and answered it.

"Arnie here, Lew. Blackwell didn't turn up at the dragging operations. Sholto was there all day, and he says that Blackwell hasn't been at the lodge since the middle of May. Got that?"

"Yes."

"Get this. Harriet's car has been spotted. It was found abandoned off the highway north of Malibu. We just got word from the CHP. What does that mean to you?"

"More driving. I'll go out there and take a look at the car."

"About Blackwell, what do we do if he shows up?"

"He won't. But if he does, stay close to him."

Arnie said with a strain of grievance in his voice: "It would help if I knew what the problem was."

"Blackwell is a suspect in two known murders; two other possibles. The ones I know about for sure are Dolly Stone and Ralph Simpson. He's probably armed and dangerous."

Isobel Blackwell struck me on the shoulder with her fist and said: "No!"

"Are you all right, Lew?" Arnie's voice had altered, become soothing, almost caressing. "You haven't been sitting up all night with a bottle?"

"I'm sober as a judge, soberer than some. You ought to be getting official confirmation in the course of the day."

I hung up before he could ask me questions I wasn't ready to answer. Isobel Blackwell was looking at me strangely, as if I had created the situation and somehow made it real by telling Arnie about it. The light from the windows was cruel on her face.

"Has my husband's car been found?"

"Harriet's. I'm going out to Malibu to look at it."

"Does it mean she's alive?"

"I don't know what it means."

"You suspect Mark of killing Harriet, too."

"We'd better not discuss what I suspect. I'll be back. If your husband should come home, don't tell him what's been said here tonight."

"He has a right to know—"

"Not from you, Mrs. Blackwell. We can't predict how he'd react."

"Mark would never injure me."

But there was a questioning note in her voice, and her hand went to her throat. Her head moved from side to side in the collar of her fingers.

chapter 28

I DROVE OUT TO Malibu through the chilly dawn. The zebra-striped hearse was still parked by the roadside at Zuma. The sight of it did nothing for me at all.

The HP dispatcher working the graveyard shift had an open paperback on the desk in front of him, and seemed to begrudge his answers to my questions. Harriet's Buick Special was impounded in a local garage; it wouldn't be available for inspection until the garage opened at eight.

"When was it picked up?"

"Last night, before I came on duty."

"You came on at midnight?"

"That's correct."

His eyes kept straying downward to his book. He was a fat man with a frowzy unwed aura.

"Can you tell me where it was found?"

He consulted his records. "Side road off the highway about six miles north of here. According to the officer, the woman in the lunchroom said it was there all day. She got around to reporting it when she closed up for the night."

"What lunchroom is that?"

"It's one of those jumbo shrimp traps. You'll see the sign on the right as you go north."

He picked up his book. It had a picture on the cover of a man riding a horse into a kind of nuclear sunset.

I drove out of the straggling beachfront town and north on the highway to the jumbo shrimp place. It was the same establishment in which I had sat and drunk coffee long ago at the beginning of the case. Harriet's

car had been abandoned within a few hundred yards of her father's beach house.

I turned left down the hill, nosed my car into the parking area, and parked at the railing beside a black Cadillac. The tide was high, and the sea brimmed up like blue mercury. Some pelicans were sailing far out over it, tiny within the amplitude of the sky.

The Cadillac had Blackwell's name on the steering post. I walked along the gangway to his beach house. I was keenly aware of every sound and movement, my own, the thumping and shushing of the waves, the distant cry of a scavenger gull following the pelicans. Then my knocking on Blackwell's door was the only sound.

Finally I let myself in with his key. Nothing had been changed in the high raftered room, except for what had been done to Campion's painting. Someone had slashed it so that the morning sun came jaggedly through it like lightning in a cloud.

I went to the head of the stairs and called down: "Blackwell! Are you there?"

No answer.

I called Harriet. My voice rang through the house. I felt like a self-deluded medium trying to summon up the spirits of the dead. I moved reluctantly down the steps and more reluctantly through the big front bedroom into the bathroom. I think I smelled the spillage before I saw it.

I turned on the bathroom light. A towel in the sink was soaked and heavy with coagulating blood. I lifted it by one corner, dropped it back into the sink. Splatters of blood were congealed on the linoleum floor. I stepped across them and opened the door into the back bedroom. It had a broken lock.

Blackwell was there, sitting in his shirtsleeves on the edge of a bare mattress. His face was white, except where it was shadowed by black beard. He looked at me like a thief.

"Good morning," he said. "It would have to be you."

"Bad morning. Who have you been killing this morning?"

He screwed up his face, as if a glare had fallen across it. "No one."

"The bathroom is a shambles. Whose blood is it?"

"Mine. I cut myself shaving."

"You haven't shaved for at least twenty-four hours."

He touched his chin absently. I sensed that he was out of contact, trying to fill the gap between himself and reality with any words he could think of from moment to moment.

"I cut myself shaving yesterday. That's old blood. Nobody died today."

"Who died yesterday?"

"I did." He grimaced in the invisible glare.

"You're not that lucky. Stand up."

He rose obediently. I shook him down, though I hated to touch his body. He had no weapon on him. I told him to sit again, and he sat.

The angry will had gone out of him. A sort of fretfulness had taken its place. I had seen that fretfulness before, in far-gone men. It was like a rat gnawing their hearts and it made them dangerous, to others and themselves.

A slow leakage of water glazed his eyes. "I've had a lonely night."

"What have you been doing?"

"Nothing in particular. Waiting. I hoped that daylight would give me the strength to get up and move. But the daylight is worse than the darkness." He sniffed a little. "I don't know why I'm talking to you. You don't like me."

I didn't try to pretend anything. "It's good you're able and willing to talk. We have the business of the confession to get over."

"Confession? I have nothing to confess. The blood in the bathroom is old blood. I didn't spill it."

"Who did?"

"Vandals, possibly. Vandals must have broken in. We've had a lot of vandalism over the years."

"We've had a lot of murders over the years. Let's start with the first one. Why did you kill Ronald Jaimet?"

He looked up like a white-haired child horribly ravaged by age. "I didn't kill him. His death was the result of an accident. He fell and broke his ankle, and his needle. It took me a day and a night to get him out of the mountains. Without his insulin he became very sick. He died of his illness. It was all completely accidental."

"Just how did the accident happen?"

"Ronald and I had a scuffle, a friendly scuffle. His foot slipped on a stone and went over the edge of the trail. His weight came down on his ankle. I actually heard it snap."

"What was the friendly scuffle about?"

"Nothing, really. He was joshing me a bit, about my affection for a young protégée of his. It's true I was fond of the girl, but that was as far as it went. I never — I never did her any physical harm. My feelings were pure, and I told Ronald this. I think I pushed him, in a playful way, to emphasize what I was saying. I had no idea of making him fall."

"And no intention of killing him?"

He puzzled over the question. "I don't see how I could have wanted to kill him. Wouldn't I have left him there if I had?" He added, as if this

would clinch it: "Ronald was my favorite cousin. He greatly resembled my mother."

He gave me a peculiar wet look. I was afraid he was going to talk about his mother. They often did.

I said: "When did you start having sexual relations with Dolly Stone?"

His eyes shifted away. They were almost lost in the puffiness around them, as if he had been beaten by intangible fists. "Oh. That."

"That."

He lay back on the bed, curling his body sideways so that his head rested on the uncovered striped pillow. He said in a hushed voice: "I swear to heaven I didn't touch her when she was a child. I merely adored her from a distance. She was like a fairy princess. And I didn't go near her after Ronald died. I didn't see her again till we met last spring at Tahoe. She was grown up, but I felt as though I'd found my fairy princess once again.

"I invited her to the lodge, simply with the idea of showing it to her. But I was too happy. And she was willing. She came back more than once on her own initiative. I lived in pure delight and pure misery—delight when I was with her, and misery the rest of my waking hours. Then she turned against me, and I was in utter misery all the time." He sighed like an adolescent lover.

"What turned her against you?"

"We ran into difficulties."

I was weary of his euphemisms. "You mean you got her pregnant."

"That, and other things, other difficulties. She turned against me finally and completely." He drew up his legs. "I went through hell last summer. She put me through hell."

"How did she do that?"

"I was fearful of losing her, and just as fearful of what would happen if I tried to hold her. I was utterly at her mercy. It was a very tense period. I couldn't stomach some of the things she said. She called me a dirty old man. Then my daughter Harriet joined me at the lodge, and the whole thing became impossible. Dolly wouldn't come to me any more, but she kept threatening to tell Harriet about us."

He squirmed and tossed like a restless sleeper. The bed creaked under him in harsh mimicry of the noises of passion.

"Was Dolly blackmailing you?"

"I wouldn't put it that way. I gave her money, altogether a good deal of money. Then I stopped hearing from her entirely. But I was still on tenterhooks. The thing could erupt publicly at any time. I didn't know she'd married until this spring."

"In the meantime you married Isobel Jaimet as a buffer."

"It was more than that," he insisted. "Isobel was an old and trusted friend. I was — I am genuinely fond of Isobel."

"Lucky Isobel."

He looked up at me with hatred in his eyes. But he was too broken to sustain it. He turned his face into the pillow. I had the queer impression that under the tangled white hair at the back of his head was another face made of blind bone.

"Tell me the rest of it," I said.

He lay so still that he didn't appear to be breathing. It occurred to me that he was holding his breath as angry children did when the world turned unpermissive.

"Tell me the rest of it, Blackwell."

He began to breathe visibly. His shoulders rose and fell. His body jerked in occasional little spasms. It was the only response I could get from him.

"Then I'll tell you, and I'll make it short, because the police will be eager to talk to you. Dolly renewed her demands for money this spring — she'd had a hard winter. You decided to put a final stop to the demands and the uncertainty. You went to her house in the middle of the night of May the fifth. Her husband wasn't there—he was out with another woman. I suppose Dolly let you in because she thought you were bringing her money. You strangled her with one of her stockings."

Blackwell groaned as though he felt the nylon around his withering neck.

"Then you noticed the baby, your own bastard son. For some reason you couldn't bear to leave him in the room with the dead woman. Perhaps you had the child's safety and welfare in mind. I'd like to think so. At any rate you picked him up and carried him down the road to a neighbor's car. The child got hold of a button on your coat which may have been loosened during your struggle with Dolly. It was still in his fist when the neighbor woman found him. The button has brought this whole thing home to you.

"When Dolly's husband was indicted for her murder, his friend Ralph Simpson set out to track down its source. He probably knew of your affair with Dolly, and had a pretty good idea where the button came from. He went up to Tahoe and got you to employ him and eventually found the coat where you had hidden it. Perhaps he confronted you with it. You fired him and came back here. Instead of taking the coat to the police, as he ought to have, he followed you south with it. He may have had a dream of solving the crime by himself—Simpson was a failure who needed a success—or maybe the dream went sour in him and turned into money-hunger. Did he attempt to blackmail you?"

He spoke inarticulately into the pillow.

"It doesn't greatly matter now," I said. "It will come out at the trial. It will come out that you took a silver icepick from your house when you went to meet Simpson. I think it was no accident that the icepick was a wedding present from Dolly's parents. It was certainly no accident that you buried his body in what had been Ronald Jaimet's back yard. I don't know what was going on in your head. I don't believe you could tell me if you tried. A psychiatrist would be interested in what went on in that back yard when Dolly was a child."

Blackwell cried out. His voice was thin and muffled. It sounded like a ghost trapped in the haunted house of his mind. I remembered his saying that he was dead and I pitied him as you pity the dead, from a long way off.

He turned his head sideways. His visible eye was open, but featureless as a mollusk in the harsh shell of his brow.

"Is that how it was?" he said. There seemed to be no irony in his question.

"I don't claim to know all the details. If you're willing to talk now, correct me."

"Why should I correct your errors for you?"

"You're talking for the record, not for me. Is that Harriet's blood in the bathroom?"

"Yes."

"Did you kill her?"

"Yes. I cut her throat." His voice was flat and unemotional.

"Why? Because she caught on to you and had to be silenced?"

"Yes."

"What did you do with her body?"

"You'll never find it." A kind of giggle rattled out of his throat and made his lips flutter. "I'm a dirty old man, as Dolly said. Why don't you put me out of my misery? You have a gun, don't you?"

"No. I wouldn't use it on you if I had. You're not that important to me. Where is your daughter's body?"

The giggle erupted again, and amplified itself into a laugh. Whoops of laughter surged up into his throat and choked him. He sat up coughing.

"Get me some water, for pity's sake."

For pity's sake I started into the bathroom. Then I heard the furtive rustle of his movement. One of his hands was groping under the pillow. It came out holding a revolver which wavered in my direction and then held steady.

"Get out of here or I'll shoot you. You don't want to be the fifth one."

I backed through the doorway.

"Close the door. Stay in there."

I obeyed his orders. The bathroom seemed hideously familiar. The towel lay like a maimed thing in the sink.

Blackwell's gun went off on the other side of the door. It was still in his mouth when I reached him, like a pipe of queer design which he had fallen asleep smoking.

chapter 29

I GOT BACK TO Isobel Blackwell around noon. All morning county cars had bumped down the old blacktop road, and county men had tramped back and forth along the gangway to the beach house. I told my story, and Blackwell's, till it grated on my tongue. If I had any doubts of Blackwell's credibility, I suppressed them. I was bone-tired, and eager to see the case ended.

They trundled his body away. We searched for Harriet's body in the house and under it, and up and down the beach. We went back to Malibu and examined her car. It told us nothing.

"The consensus is that Harriet's in the sea," I told Isobel Blackwell, "that he disposed of her body in the same way he disposed of the topcoat. And like the topcoat it will probably come in with the next big tide."

We were in her sitting room. The drapes were closed, and she had left the lights off. Perhaps she didn't want me to see her face; perhaps she didn't want to see mine. She sat in a long chair and peered at me through the artificial gloom as if I was as monstrous as the things I had had to tell her. The side-to-side movement of her head, the gesture of incomprehension and denial, was threatening to become habitual.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Blackwell. I thought you'd rather hear it from me than get it from the police or read it in the newspapers."

"Does it have to be in the newspapers?"

"It will be. You don't have to read them. After you've gathered yourself together, you ought to take a long trip, put all this behind you." My suggestion sounded feeble in my own ears.

"I couldn't face a journey now." After a pause, she said in a softer voice: "I thought horrors like this only occurred in Greek plays."

"The horrors will pass. Tragedy is like a sickness, and it passes. Even the horrors in the Greek plays are long since past."

"That's not much comfort to me here and now."

"It's something to think about."

"I don't want to think." But she sat locked in thought, as still as ancient marble, her mind transfixed by the Medusa fact: "How could he bring himself to kill Harriet? He loved her."

"In a sick way. Where girls were concerned, even his own, he was a mother's boy playing with dolls in the attic. Love like that can change to hatred if it's threatened. You cut off the doll's head –"

"He cut off her head?"

"I was speaking figuratively. Apparently he cut her throat with an old razor blade. He used the same blade to slash Campion's painting."

Her head had begun its sidewise movement again. "I can understand why Mark had to kill Dolly, or thought he had to. Once he'd used her, she threatened him by her very existence. Ralph Simpson was a threat, and even Ronald must have seemed to be. But Harriet was his own daughter."

"I suspect she was another threat to him, the most intimate one of all. Did Harriet know about his affair with Dolly?"

"I'm afraid so. Mark had a horrible habit of confession. I don't suppose he poured it all out, but he did say something to Harriet last spring. He may have felt it was bound to come out, and it was his duty to prepare her. It didn't have the desired effect."

"How do you know?"

"Because Harriet came to me with it. She said she had to talk to someone. She was greatly upset, much more deeply upset than I'd ever seen her. She regressed to a very low age level; she was literally bawling with her head in my lap. I didn't think she should be encouraged to throw childish fits at her age. I told her she ought to be able to take it if I could."

"How did she handle that?"

"She got up and left the room. We didn't discuss the subject again. I felt that Mark had made a mistake in telling her. It didn't improve the situation among the three of us."

"When did this happen?"

"Some time in March or April. I imagine Mark was concerned about the birth of the child, and that's why he spoke to Harriet, though he never said a word about it to me. Looking back, it does throw some light on what Harriet was feeling. Dolly had displaced her in Mark's affections, as she thought. A couple of months later she attached herself to Dolly's widower. Do you suppose she was aware of what she was doing?"

"Yes," I said, "and Campion knew what he was doing, but neither of

them told the other. I believe that Campion took up with her in Mexico precisely because she was Mark's daughter. He suspected Mark of killing his wife, and cooked up an affair with Harriet in order to get close to him. He surely wouldn't have come back from Mexico, with an indictment hanging over him, unless he hoped to clear himself."

"Why didn't he ever say anything?"

"He did, last Monday afternoon, when your husband turned a shotgun on him. I failed to get the message. He hasn't talked since then because he knew he wouldn't be believed. Campion's a maverick, an authority-hater, with a certain pride of his own. But he'll be talking now, and I want to be there when he spills over. You can pay my time and expenses if you like."

"I'll be glad to."

"You're a generous woman. After some of the things I said to you last night—"

She cut me short with a movement of her head. "They helped me, Mr. Archer. You were cruel at the time, but actually you were preparing me—for this."

"I was doing more than that. I considered you a possible murder suspect."

"I know. The point is that you don't any more. It's over."

"Almost over. Campion's testimony should wind up the case."

"What do you suppose he will have to say?"

"He probably made the mistake of speaking out to Harriet at the lodge, accusing Mark of Dolly's murder. She couldn't take it; it completely destroyed her image of her father. It must have been a shock, too, to learn that Campion had been using her, that his interest in her was mainly on his dead wife's account. They quarreled, violently. Campion got his face scratched, she was hit on the head, somehow her hat got knocked into the water. She couldn't have been badly hurt—she was well enough to drive to Malibu—but Campion didn't know that. Judging by his attitude the other night, he may have thought he killed her, or injured her seriously."

"But she drove herself from Tahoe to Malibu?"

"Apparently. It took her more than twenty-four hours. She may have had her head wound attended to on the way. She reached the beach house early yesterday morning and telephoned her father. Perhaps she accused him of murder over the phone, or asked him to deny it. He left you a note to put you off the track, went to the beach house, and killed her. He carried her body down to the beach and let it go out with the tide.

"But he had killed once too often. This doll bled. It was his daughter's blood, and it was real. He was so paralyzed he couldn't clean up after his final murder. He sat in the back bedroom all day and all night

trying to gather the strength to kill himself. Perhaps he had to talk to someone before he did. I happened to be the one."

"I'm glad it was you, Mr. Archer. And I'm glad he didn't kill you. Truly glad."

She rose up in the ruins of her life and gave me her hand. I said I would be seeing her again. She didn't deny it, even with a movement of her head.

chapter 30

CAMPION HAD BEEN MOVED to the San Mateo County jail. He still wasn't talking. After some palaver with Captain Royal and his chief, and telephone calls to their opposite numbers in Los Angeles, I got permission to interview him alone. Royal brought him into the interrogation room and left us together, locking the steel-sheathed door behind him.

Campion stood with his back to the door. He didn't say hello or nod his head. Bad nights had left their nightmare tracks on his face, but he still had a kind of frayed intensity. He looked at me as though I might lunge at him with a rubber hose.

"How are you, Bruce? Sit down."

"Is that an order?"

"It's an invitation," I said in a mollifying tone. "Mark Blackwell has confessed your wife's murder. Did Royal tell you?"

"He told me. It came a little late. I'm going to sue you all for false arrest."

"That doesn't sound like such a wise idea. You're pretty vulnerable."

"Then when are they going to let me out? I've got work to go on with."

"You've got some talking to do first. If you'd leveled with the cops, you wouldn't be here—"

"Don't snow me. I know cops. They make patsies out of the little ones and let the big ones go."

"You made a patsy out of yourself. Think about it."

I left him standing and moved around the bright barred room. Campion's eyes followed me warily. After a while he sat down at a metal table, resting his bandaged head on one hand.

I approached him and touched his shoulder. "Listen, Bruce—"

He raised both arms to protect his head.

"Relax. I'm not your enemy."

He twisted under my hand. "Then don't stand over me. I've always hated people standing over me."

I sat down across the table from him. "I assume you're a serious man in spite of the cop-hater nonsense. You've been through some rough experiences, and I respect that. You could have spared yourself some of the roughness by trusting other people."

"Who was there to trust?"

"Me, for one. Royal can be trusted, too. He's not a bad cop. Why didn't you tell us the truth the night before last? You let us believe that Harriet was dead and you had drowned her."

"You would have gone on believing it no matter what I said."

"But you didn't give us a chance. You didn't give her a chance, either. You might have saved her life."

His right fist clenched on the table. "I tried. I tried to stop her. But I can't swim too well. She got away from me in the dark."

"We seem to be talking past each other. When did she get away from you?"

"That night at the lake, Tuesday night I think it was. She went berserk when I told her I suspected her father of killing Dolly. She came at me clawing—I had to hit her to get her off me. It was a bad scene, and it got worse. Before I knew what she was doing, she ran out of the lodge and down to the lake. I plunged in after her, but she was already gone. I'm afraid I panicked then."

"Is this the truth?"

His eyes came up to mine. "I swear it is. I didn't tell you and Royal because you would have taken any such admission as a confession of guilt." He looked at his fist; slowly it came unclenched. "I still can't prove I didn't knock her out and drown her."

"You don't have to. She didn't drown in Tahoe. If suicide was in her mind that night, she changed her mind. Evidently she came out of the water after you'd gone."

"Then she's still alive!"

"She's dead, but you didn't kill her. Her father did. He confessed it along with his other murders before he shot himself."

"Why in the name of God did he do that?"

"God only knows. She probably accused him to his face of murdering Dolly."

Emotions warred across Campion's face: incredulity and relief and self-reproach. He tried to wipe them away with his hand.

"I should never have told Harriet about her father," he said. "I see

now why I should have been honest with you. But I thought you were working for Blackwell, covering up for him."

"We were both mistaken about each other. Do you want to straighten me out about a few other matters?"

"I suppose so. I seem to be on the truth kick."

"You were in serious trouble during the Korean War," I said by way of testing him. "What was it?"

"It was after the war. We were sitting around in Japan waiting for transport." He made an impatient outward gesture with his arm. "To make a long story short, I hit the officer in charge of the staging point. I broke his nose. He was a Colonel."

"Did you have a reason, apart from the fact that you don't like Colonels?"

"My reason may sound foolish to you. He caught me sketching one day and thought it would be dandy if I painted his portrait. I told him I didn't take orders about my work. We got into a battle of wills. He threatened to keep me over there till I painted him. I hit him. If he'd had a little less rank, or a little more, or if he'd belonged to our unit, it wouldn't have been so bad. But face had to be saved and I got a year in a detention camp and a D.D. I didn't paint him, though," he added with bitter satisfaction.

"You're a pretty good hater. What do you like?"

"The life of the imagination," he said. "It's all I'm good for. Every time I try to do something in the actual world I make a mess of it. I never should have married Dolly, for instance."

"Why did you?"

"It's a hard question. I've been thinking about the answers to it ever since I got into this jam. The main thing was the money, of course—I'd be a hypocrite if I denied that. She had a little money, call it a dowry. I was trying to prepare a series of pictures for a show, and I needed money to do it. You always need money, at least I do, and so we struck a bargain."

"You knew about her pregnancy?"

"It was one of the attractions, in a way."

"Most men would feel the opposite way."

"I'm not most men. I liked the idea of having a child but I didn't want to be anybody's father. I didn't care who the father was, so long as it wasn't me. Does that sound foolish? It may have something to do with the fact that my old man did the disappearing-father act when I was four years old." There was a growl of resentment in his voice.

"Did your father have trouble with the law?"

He said with a sour mocking grin: "My father was the law. He was a lousy Chicago cop, with both front feet in the trough. A bad act. I remember

the last time I saw him. I was eighteen at the time, hacking my way through art school. He was helping a blonde into a Cadillac in front of an apartment hotel on the Gold Coast." He cleared his throat. "Next question."

"Getting back to Dolly—I'm not quite clear how you felt about her."

"Neither am I. I started out feeling sorry for her. I thought it might develop into something real—that's an old boyish dream of mine." His mouth curled in self-irony. "It didn't. You know the pity that chills the heart? Oddly enough I never went to bed with her. I loved to paint her, though. That's my way of loving people. I'm not much good at the other ways."

"I thought you were a devil with the ladies."

He flushed. "I've done my share of rutting. A lot of them think it's artistic to bed with an artist. But there was only one in my life I cared about—and that one didn't last. I was too fouled up."

"What was her name?"

"Does it matter? Her first name was Anne."

"Anne Castle."

He gave me a bright astonished look. "Who told you about her?"

"She did. I was in Ajijic two or three nights ago. She spoke of you with great affection."

"Well," he said. "That's a fresh note for a change. Is Anne all right?"

"She probably would be if she didn't have you to worry about. It broke her heart when you decamped with Harriet. The least you can do is write her a letter."

He sat quiet for a time. I think he was composing the letter in his head. To judge by his frowning concentration, he was having a hard time with it.

"If Anne was important to you," I said, "why did you take up with Harriet?"

"I'd already made a commitment." His eyes were still turned inward on himself.

"I don't follow you, Campion."

"I didn't meet Harriet in Mexico, as you seem to think. I met her in my own house in Luna Bay several weeks before I went to Mexico. She came to see Dolly and the baby. She and Dolly were old friends. But Dolly wasn't there that afternoon—she'd taken the baby in for his monthly checkup. Harriet stood around watching me paint. She was an amateur painter herself, and she got very excited over what I was doing. She was quite an excitable girl."

"So?"

Campion looked at me uneasily. "I couldn't help thinking what she could do for me, with a little encouragement. I was broke, as usual, and she obviously wasn't. I thought it would be pleasant to have a patroness.

I could stop worrying about the light bill and simply do my work. I made a date with her before Dolly got back with the baby. I saw her that night, and before long we were spending nights together.

"I didn't know what I was letting myself in for. Harriet acted as though she'd never been with a man. She fell so hard it scared me. She drove over from Tahoe a couple of times a week, and we were in and out of the motels. I should have had the sense to pull out of the situation. I had a feeling that it would lead to trouble." He drew in a deep breath.

"What kind of trouble?"

"I didn't know. But she was a serious girl, too serious, and terribly passionate. I shouldn't have led her on."

"Did you suspect that Blackwell was the baby's father?"

He hesitated. "I may have, more or less subconsciously. Harriet said something once, when she was holding the baby in her arms. She called him little brother. It stuck in my mind, though I didn't realize she was speaking literally."

"And Dolly never told you?"

"No. I didn't press the point, while she was alive. I didn't really want to know who the father was. I thought I could love the baby better if he was anonymous. But it turned out I couldn't love him too well. Him or anybody. Then I messed the whole thing up when I tried to go into orbit with Harriet. I should have stayed home and looked after Dolly and the baby."

His voice was low, and I thought I heard the growl of manhood in it. He rose and struck his open left palm with his closed right fist. Shaking hands with himself in an embarrassed way, he went to the window.

"I was with Harriet the night Dolly was killed," he said with his back turned.

"Harriet was the woman you slept with in the Travelers Motel?"

"That's right. Slept isn't quite accurate. We had an argument, and she started back to Tahoe in the middle of the night. I stayed in the room and got drunk. She'd brought me a bottle of her father's Scotch." He seemed to take a painful pride in spelling out the details of his humiliation.

"What was the argument about?"

"Marriage. She wanted to buy me a Reno divorce. I won't deny I was tempted, but when it came to a showdown I found I couldn't do it. I didn't love Harriet. I didn't love Dolly, either, but I had made a bargain with her to give the boy my name. I kept hoping if I stuck with it I'd learn to love the boy. But it was already too late. When I sobered up enough to drive myself home, Dolly was dead and the boy was gone and the cops were there."

"Why didn't you tell them where you'd spent the night? You had an alibi of sorts."

"It didn't look as if I'd have to use it. They questioned me and let me go. As soon as I was free, I got in touch with Harriet at Tahoe. She said I mustn't on any account drag her or her family into it. She was protecting her father, obviously, though she didn't say so. She sold me the idea of hiding out after they indicted me, and I spent a bad couple of weeks shut up in their beach house. I wanted to go on to Mexico—Ralph lent me his birth certificate with that in mind—but I had no money.

"Harriet finally gave me the money for the flight. She said that she would join me in Mexico later, and we could pretend to be strangers, and pick up where we'd left off. We could stay in Mexico or go further down into South America." He turned from the window—his face had been opened by the light. "I suppose she saw her chance to sew me up for life. And I was tempted, again. I'm a very ambivalent guy."

"I'm wondering about Harriet's motive. You suggested she was protecting her father. Did she know, at that time, that he had murdered Dolly?"

"I don't see how she could have." He fingered the scratches on his face. "Look how she reacted when I told her about my suspicions the other night."

"Just when did you develop those suspicions?"

"It happened over a period of time. Ralph Simpson brought up the name before I left Luna Bay. He'd seen Dolly with Blackwell last summer. Ralph fancied himself as a detective, and he was very interested in a leather button that was found at the scene of the crime. The police mentioned it, too. Do you know anything about that button?"

"Too much." I summarized the history of the wandering topcoat.

"So Blackwell killed Ralph."

"He confessed the murder this morning, along with the others."

"Poor old Ralph." Campion lowered himself into a chair and sat for a while in blank-eyed silence. "Ralph should never have got mixed up with me. I'm a moral typhoid carrier."

"It's a thought," I said. "But you were telling me about your suspicions of Blackwell and how they grew."

After another silence he went on: "Ralph started me thinking about Blackwell. Bits and pieces, associations, began to gather, and eventually I had a sort of Gestalt. Some of the things that went into it were Harriet's interest in the baby, and the slip she made, if it was a slip, about her little brother. Then Dolly started getting money from somewhere, about the time that Harriet turned up at our house. I didn't understand the relation-

ship between Dolly and Harriet. It was pleasant enough on the surface, but there was a good deal of hostility under it."

"That would be natural enough, if Dolly knew you were making love to Harriet."

"She didn't. Anyway, the relationship didn't change from the first afternoon Harriet came to the house. They greeted each other like two sisters who hated each other but refused to admit it. I can see now why that would be: Harriet knew about Dolly's fling with her father, and Dolly knew she knew."

"You still haven't told me when you found out."

"I got my Gestalt one night in Mexico, after Harriet came. We were talking in my studio, and the subject of her father's lodge at Tahoe came up. I don't know how." He turned his head to one side, as though he had overheard a distant voice. "Yes, I do know. She was hot on the marriage trail again, in spite of the fact that I was wanted for murder. She was fantasying about going back to the States where we could settle down in the lodge and live happily ever after. She got quite lyrical in her descriptions of the place. Oddly enough, I'd heard it all before."

"From Harriet?"

"From Dolly. Dolly used to tell me stories about the sweet old lady who befriended her when she was on her uppers in State Line last summer. She gave me detailed descriptions of the sweet old lady's house—the beamed ceilings, the lake view, the layout of the rooms. It suddenly hit me that it was Blackwell's house and that Blackwell was the sweet old lady and probably the father of my"—he swallowed the word—"the father of Dolly's child. I didn't say a word to Harriet at the time, but I decided to go back to the States with her. I wanted to find out more about the sweet old lady. Well, I have."

A complex grief controlled the lines of his face like a magnetic field.

chapter 31

GETTING OUT OF my cab at the San Francisco airport, I saw a woman I vaguely recognized standing with a suitcase in front of the main terminal building. She was wearing a tailored suit whose skirt was a little too long for the current fashion. It was Anne Castle, minus her earrings and with the addition of a rakish hat.

I took the suitcase out of her hand. "May I carry this, Miss Castle?"

She looked up at my face. Her own was so deeply shadowed by trouble that her vision seemed clouded. Slowly her brow cleared.

"Mr. Archer! I intended to look you up, and here you are. Surely you didn't follow me from Los Angeles?"

"You seem to have followed me. I imagine we both came here for the same reason. Bruce Campion, alias Burke Damis."

She nodded gravely. "I heard a report yesterday on the Guadalajara radio. I decided to drop everything and come here. I want to help him even if he did kill his wife. There must be mitigating circumstances."

Her upward look was steady and pure. I caught myself on the point of envying Campion, wondering how the careless ones got women like her to care for them so deeply. I said: "Your friend is innocent. His wife was murdered by another man."

"No!"

"Yes."

Tears started in her eyes. She stood blind and smiling.

"We need to talk, Anne. Let's go some place we can sit down."

"But I'm on my way to see him."

"It can wait. He'll be busy with the police for some time. They have a lot of questions to ask him, and this is the first day he's been willing to answer."

"Why do they have to question him if he's innocent?"

"He's a material witness. He also has a good deal of explaining to do."

"Because he used a false name to cross the border?"

"That doesn't concern the local police. It's the business of the Justice Department. I'm hoping they won't press charges. A man who's been wrongly indicted for murder has certain arguments on his side—what you called mitigating circumstances."

"Yes," she said. "We'll fight it. Has he done anything else?"

"I can't think of anything that's actionable. But there are some things you should know before you see him. Let me buy you a drink."

"I don't think I'd better. I haven't been sleeping too well, and I have to keep my wits about me. Could we have coffee?"

We went upstairs to the restaurant, and over several cups of coffee I told her the whole story of the case. It made more sense in the telling than it had in the acting out. Reflected in her deep eyes, her subtle face, it seemed to be transformed from a raffish melodrama into a tragedy of errors in which Campion and the others had been caught. But I didn't whitewash him. I thought she deserved to know the worst about him, including his sporadic designs on Harriet's money and his partial responsibility for her death.

She reached across the table and stopped me with her hand on my sleeve. "I saw Harriet last night."

I looked at her closely. Her eyes were definite, alive with candor.

"Harriet isn't dead. Her father must have been lying, or hallucinating. I know I wasn't."

"Where did you see her?"

"In the Guadalajara airport, when I went in to make my reservation. It was about nine-thirty last night. She was waiting for her bag at the end of the ticket counter. I heard her call out that it was *azul*—blue—and I knew her voice. She'd evidently just come in on the Los Angeles plane."

"Did you speak to her?"

"I tried to. She didn't recognize me, or pretended not to. She turned away very brusquely and ran out to the taxi stands. I didn't follow her."

"Why not?"

She answered carefully: "I felt I had no right to interfere with her. I was a little frightened of her, too. She had that terribly bright-faced look. I don't know if I'm making myself clear, but I've seen that look on other people who were far out."

chapter 32

I FOUND HER late Monday afternoon in a village in Michoacán. The village had an Aztec name which I forget, and a church with Aztec figures carved in some of its ancient stones. A roughly cobbled road like the bed of a dry creek ran past the church.

A beggar woman in widow's black met me at the door and followed me into the nave reciting griefs I couldn't understand, though I could see the scars they had left on her. Her face broke up in wrinkled smiles and blessings when I gave her money. She went out and left me alone in the church with Harriet.

She was kneeling on the stone floor close to the chancel. She had a black *rebozo* over her head, and she was as still as the images of the saints along the walls.

She scrambled to her feet when I said her name. Her mouth worked stiffly, but no words came out. The shawl covering her hair accentuated the stubborn boniness of her face.

"Do you remember me?"

"Yes." Her small voice was made smaller by the cavernous space around us. "How did you know—?"

"The *posadero* told me you've been here all day."

She moved her arm in an abrupt downward gesture. "I don't mean that. How did you know I was in Mexico?"

"You were seen—by other Americans."

"I don't believe you. Father sent you to bring me back, didn't he? He promised that he wouldn't. But he never kept his promises to me, not once in my life."

"He kept this one."

"Then why have you followed me here?"

"I didn't make any promises, to you or anyone."

"But you're supposed to be working for Father. He said when he put me on the plane that he would call off the dogs once and for all."

"He tried to. There isn't anything more he can do for you now. Your father is dead, Harriet. He shot himself Friday morning."

"You're lying! He can't be dead!"

The force of the words shook her body. She raised her hands to cover her face. I could see in her sleeves the flesh-colored tape securing the bandages at her wrists. I had seen such bandages before on would-be suicides.

"I was there when he shot himself. Before he did, he confessed the murders of Ralph Simpson and Dolly. He also said that he had murdered you. Why would your father do that?"

Her eyes glittered like wet stone between her fingers. "I have no idea."

"I have. He knew that you had committed those two murders. He tried to take the blame for them and arrange it so we wouldn't press the search for you. Then he silenced himself. I don't think he wanted to live in any case; he had too much guilt of his own. Ronald Jaimet's death may have been something less than a murder, but it was something more than an accident. And he must have known that his affair with Dolly led indirectly to your murdering her and Ralph Simpson. He had nothing to look forward to but your trial and the end of the Blackwell name—the same prospect you're facing now."

She removed her hands from her face. It had a queer glazed look, as if it had been fired like pottery. "I hate the Blackwell name. I wish my name was Smith or Jones or Gomez."

"It wouldn't change you or the facts. You can't lose what you've done."

"No." She shook her head despondently. "There's no hope for me. No deposit, no return, no nothing. I've been in here since early morning, trying to make contact. There is no contact."

"Are you a member of this Church?"

"I'm not a member of anything. But I thought I could find peace here. The people seemed so happy yesterday coming out of Mass—so happy and peaceful."

"They're not running away from another life."

"You call it life, what I had?" She screwed up her face as though she was trying to cry, but no tears came. "I did my best to end my so-called life. The first time the water was too cold. The second time Father wouldn't let me. He broke in the bathroom door and stopped me. He bandaged my wrists and sent me here; he said that Mother would look after

me. But when I went to her house in Ajijic she wouldn't even come out and talk to me. She sent Keith out to the gate to fob me off with a lie. He tried to tell me that she had gone away and taken the money with her."

"Keith Hatchen told you the truth. I've talked to him, and your mother as well. She went to California to try and help you. She's waiting in Los Angeles."

"You're a liar." Her sense of grievance rose like a storm in her throat. "You're all liars, liars and betrayers. Keith betrayed me to you, didn't he?"

"He said that you had been to his house."

"See!" She pointed a finger at my eyes. "Everybody betrayed me, including Father."

"I told you he didn't. He did his best to cover up for you. Your father loved you, Harriet."

"Then why did he betray me with Dolly Stone?" She stabbed the air with her finger like a prosecutor.

"Men get carried away sometimes. It wasn't done against you."

"Wasn't it? I know better. She turned him against me when we were just little kids. I wasn't so little, but she was. She was so pretty, like a little doll. Once he bought her a doll that was almost as big as she was. He bought me a doll just like it to make it up to me. I didn't want it. I was too old for dolls. I wanted my daddy."

Her voice had thinned to a childish treble. It sounded through the spaces of the old building like an archaic voice piping out of the crypts of the past.

"Tell me about the murders, Harriet."

"I don't have to."

"You want to, though. You wouldn't be here if you didn't."

"I tried to tell the priest. My Spanish wasn't good enough. But you're no priest."

"No, I'm just a man. You can tell me, anyway. Why did you have to kill Dolly?"

"At least you understand that I did *have* to. First she stole my father and then she stole my husband."

"I thought Bruce was her husband."

She shook her head. "It wasn't a marriage. I could sense that it wasn't a marriage as soon as I saw them with each other. They were just two people living together, facing in opposite directions. Bruce wanted out of it. He told me so himself, the very first day."

"Why did you go there that first day?"

"Father asked me to. He was afraid to go near her himself, but he said that no one could criticize me if I paid her a visit and gave her a gift of

money. I had to see the baby, anyway. My little brother. I believed that seeing him would make me feel—differently. I was so terribly torn asunder when Father told me about him." She raised both fists beside her head and shook them, not at me. She said between her fists: "And there Bruce was. I fell in love with him as soon as I saw him. He loved me, too. He didn't change till afterward."

"What changed him?"

"*She* did, with her wiles and stratagems. He turned against me suddenly one night. We were in a motel on the other side of the Bay, and he sat there drinking my father's whisky and said he wouldn't leave her. He said he'd made a bargain he couldn't break. So I broke it for him. I took it into my hands and broke it."

She brought her fists together and broke an invisible thing. Then her arms fell limp at her sides. Her eyes went sleepy. I thought for a minute she was going to fall, but she caught herself and faced me in a kind of shaky somnambulistic defiance.

"After I killed her, I took the money back. I'd seen where she hid it, in the baby's mattress. I had to move him to get at it, and he started crying. I took him in my arms to quiet him. Then I had an overmastering urge to take him out of that place and run away with him. I started down the road with him, but suddenly I was overcome by fear. The darkness was so dense I could hardly move. Yet I could see myself, a dreadful woman walking in darkness with a little baby. I was afraid he'd be hurt."

"That you would hurt him?"

Her chin pressed down onto her chest. "Yes. I put him in somebody else's car for safekeeping. I gave him up, and I'm glad I did. At least my little brother is all right." It was a question.

"He's all right. His grandmother is looking after him. I saw him in Citrus Junction the other day."

"I almost did," she said, "the night I killed Ralph Simpson. It's funny how these things keep following you. I thought I was past the sound barrier but I heard him crying that night, in Elizabeth Stone's house. I wanted to knock on the door and visit him. I had my hand lifted to knock when I saw myself again, a dreadful woman in outer darkness, in outer space, driving a man's dead body around in my car."

"You mean Ralph Simpson."

"Yes. He came to the house that night to talk to Father. I recognized the coat he was carrying and intercepted him. He agreed to go for a drive and discuss the situation. I told him Bruce was hiding in the beach house—he said any friend of Bruce was a friend of his, poor little man—and I drove him out to the place above the beach. I stabbed him with the icepick that Mrs. Stone gave my father." Her clenched fist struck weakly

at her breast. "I intended to throw his body in the sea, but I changed my mind. I was afraid that Bruce would find it before I got him out of there. I threw the coat in the sea instead and drove to Citrus Junction."

"Why did you pick Isobel's yard to bury him in?"

"It was a safe place. I knew there was nobody there." Her eyes, her entire face, seemed to be groping blindly for a meaning. "It kept it in the family."

"Were you trying to throw the blame on Isobel?"

"Maybe I was. I don't always know why I do things, especially at night. I get the urge to do them and I do them."

"Is that why you wore your father's coat the night you killed Dolly?"

"It happened to be in the car. I was cold." She shivered with the memory. "It isn't true that I wanted him to be blamed. I loved my father. But he didn't love me."

"He loved you to the point of death, Harriet."

She shook her head, and began to shiver more violently. I put my arm around her shoulders and walked her toward the door. It opened, filling with the red sunset. The beggar woman appeared in it, black as a cinder in the blaze.

"What will happen now?" Harriet said with her head down.

"It depends on whether you're willing to waive extradition. We can go back together, if you are."

"I might as well."

The beggar held out her hands to us as we passed. I gave her money again. I had nothing to give Harriet. We went out into the changing light and started to walk up the dry riverbed of the road.

ROSS MACDONALD

The Underground Man

Ross Macdonald's real name was Kenneth Millar. Born near San Francisco in 1915 and raised in Vancouver, British Columbia, Millar returned to the U.S. as a young man and published his first novel in 1944. He served as the president of the Mystery Writers of America and was awarded their Grand Master Award, as well as the Mystery Writers of Great Britain's Silver Dagger Award. He died in 1983.

BOOKS BY ROSS MACDONALD

The Dark Tunnel
Trouble Follows Me
Blue City
The Three Roads
The Moving Target
The Drowning Pool
The Way Some People Die
The Ivory Grin
Meet Me at the Morgue
Find a Victim
The Name Is Archer
The Barbarous Coast
The Doomsters
The Galton Case
The Ferguson Affair
The Wycherly Woman
The Zebra-Striped Hearse
The Chill
Black Money
The Far Side of the Dollar
The Instant Enemy
The Goodbye Look
The Underground Man
Sleeping Beauty
The Blue Hammer

The Underground Man

ROSS MACDONALD

The Underground Man

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to Matthew J. Bruccoli

The Underground Man

chapter 1

A RATTLE OF LEAVES woke me some time before dawn. A hot wind was breathing in at the bedroom window. I got up and closed the window and lay in bed and listened to the wind.

After a while it died down, and I got up and opened the window again. Cool air, smelling of fresh ocean and slightly used West Los Angeles, poured into the apartment. I went back to bed and slept until I was wakened in the morning by my scrub jays.

I called them mine. There were five or six of them taking turns at dive-bombing the window sill, then retreating to the magnolia tree next door.

I went into the kitchen and opened a can of peanuts and threw a handful out the window. The jays swooped down into the yard of the apartment building. I put on some clothes and went down the outside stairs with the rest of the can of peanuts.

It was a bright September morning. The edges of the sky had a yellowish tinge like cheap paper darkening in the sunlight. There was no wind at all now, but I could smell the inland desert and feel its heat.

I threw my jays another handful of peanuts and watched the birds scatter on the grass. A little boy in a blue cotton suit opened the door of one of the downstairs apartments, the one that was normally occupied by a couple named Waller. The boy looked about five or six. He had dark close-cropped hair and anxious blue eyes.

"Is it all right if I come out?"

"It's all right with me."

Leaving the door wide open, he moved toward me with exaggerated caution, so as not to frighten the birds. The jays were swooping and screeching, intent on outwitting each other. They paid no attention to him.

"What are you feeding them? Peanuts?"

"That's right. Do you want some?"

"No thanks. My daddy's taking me to visit my grandma. She always gives me a lot of stuff to eat. She feeds birds, too." After a silence, he added: "I wouldn't mind feeding the jays some peanuts."

I offered him the open can. He took a fistful of peanuts and flung them on the grass. The jays came swooping. Two of them started to fight, raucously, bloodlessly.

The boy turned pale. "Are they killing each other?" he said in a tense small voice.

"No. They're just fighting."

"Do jays kill other birds?"

"Sometimes they do." I tried to change the subject: "What's your name?"

"Ronny Broadhurst. What kind of birds do they kill?"

"Young birds of other species."

The boy lifted his shoulders and held his folded arms close to his chest, like undeveloped wings. "Do they kill children?"

"No. They're not big enough."

This seemed to encourage him. "I'll try one of the peanuts now. Okay?"

"Okay."

He placed himself in front of me, face up and squinting against the morning light. "Throw it and I'll catch it in my mouth."

I threw a peanut, which he caught, and after that quite a few others. Some he caught and some fell in the grass. The jays were all around him like chunks of broken sky.

A young man in a peppermint-striped sport shirt came into the yard from the street. He looked like a grown-up version of the boy and gave the same impression of anxiety. He was puffing rapidly on a thin brown cigarillo.

As if she had been watching for the man, a woman with her dark hair in a pony-tail stepped out through the open door of the Wallers' apartment. She was pretty enough to make me conscious that I hadn't shaved.

The man pretended not to see her. He spoke to the boy formally: "Good morning, Ronald."

The boy glanced at him but didn't turn. As the man and the woman moved on him from different directions, the boy's face had lost its look of reckless pleasure. His small body seemed to grow smaller as if under the pressure of their meeting. He answered the man in a tiny voice:

"Good morning."

The man turned brusquely to the woman. "He's afraid of me. What have you been telling him, for God's sake?"

"We haven't been talking about you, Stan. For our own sake."

The man thrust his head forward. Without moving his feet, he gave the impression of attacking. "What does that mean, 'for our own sake'? Is that an accusation?"

"No, but I can think of a few if you like."

"So can I." His eyes moved in my direction. "Who's Ronny's playmate? Or is he *your* playmate?" He brandished the hot-tipped cigarillo in his hand.

"I don't even know this gentleman's name."

"Would that make a difference?" He didn't look at me.

The woman's face lost its color, as if she had become suddenly ill. "This is hard to take, Stan. I don't want trouble."

"If you didn't want trouble, why did you move out on me?"

"You know why." She said in a thin voice: "Is that girl still in the house?"

"We won't discuss her." Abruptly he turned to the boy. "Let's get out of here, Ron. We have a date with Grandma Nell in Santa Teresa."

The boy was standing between them with his fists clenched. He looked at his feet. "I don't want to go to Santa Teresa. Do I have to?"

"You have to," the woman said.

The boy edged in my direction. "But I want to stay here. I want to stay with the man." He took hold of my belt and stood with his head down, his face hidden from all adults.

His father moved on the boy. "Let go of him."

"I won't."

"Is he your mother's boyfriend? Is that what he is?"

"No."

"You're a little liar."

The man threw down his cigarillo and drew back his hand to slap the boy. I took hold of the boy under the arms, swung him out of reach, and held him. He was trembling.

The woman said: "Why don't you let him be, Stan? You can see what you're doing to him."

"What *you're* doing to him. I came here to take him on a nice trip. Mother's been looking forward to it. So what happens?" His voice rose in complaint. "I run into a nasty family scene, and Ron's all fixed up with a substitute father."

"You're not making too much sense," I said. "Ron and I are neighbors—very new neighbors. I only just met him."

"Then put him down. He's my son."

I put the boy down.

"And keep your dirty hands off him."

I was tempted to slug the man. But it wouldn't do the boy any good,

and it wouldn't do the woman any good. I said in the quietest tone I knew:

"Go away now, mister."

"I've got a right to take my son with me."

The boy said to me: "Do I have to go with him?"

"He's your father, isn't he? You're lucky to have a father who wants to take you places."

"That's right," his mother put in. "Go along now, Ronny. You always get along better with your father when I'm not around. And Grandma Nell will be sad if you don't visit her."

The boy went to his father, head down, and put his hand in the man's hand. They headed for the street.

The woman said: "I apologize for my husband."

"You don't need to. He means nothing to me."

"He does to me, though, that's the trouble. He's so terribly aggressive. He wasn't always like this."

"He couldn't have been. He wouldn't have survived."

I meant this to be a light remark, but it fell heavily. The conversation died. I tried to revive it.

"Are the Wallers friends of yours, Mrs. Broadhurst?"

"Yes. Professor Waller was my adviser when I was in school." She sounded nostalgic. "As a matter of fact he still is my adviser. He and Laura both are. I called them at Lake Tahoe last night when I—" She failed to finish the sentence. "Are they friends of yours?"

"Good neighbors. My name is Archer, by the way. I live upstairs."

She nodded. "Laura Waller mentioned you last night, when she offered me the use of their apartment. She said if I needed any kind of help, that I could call on you." She gave me a small cool smile. "In a way I have already, haven't I? Thank you for being so kind to my little boy."

"It was a pleasure."

But we were ill at ease. As angry people do, her husband had left his impression on the morning. The scene he had made still echoed dismally in the air. As if to dispel it, she said:

"I just perked some coffee. It's Laura Waller's special grind, and it looks as if it isn't going to get used. Would you like a cup?"

"Thanks, but it wouldn't be a good idea. Your husband might come back." In the street I had heard a car door open and then close, but no engine starting up. "He's pretty close to violence, Mrs. Broadhurst."

"Not really." But her tone was questioning.

"Yes, really. I've seen a lot of them, and I've learned not to stir them up when I can help it."

"Laura said that you're a detective. Is that right?" Something that looked like a challenge had come up into her face.

"Yes, but this is my day off. I hope."

I smiled, but I had said the wrong thing. A hurt look darkened her eyes and pinched her mouth. I blundered on:

"May I have a raincheck, Mrs. Broadhurst?"

She shook her head, not so much at me as at herself. "I don't know—I don't know if I'm going to stay here."

In the street the car door had opened. Stanley Broadhurst came back into the yard alone.

"Don't let me interrupt anything."

"There's nothing *to* interrupt," the woman said. "Where's Ronny?"

"In the car. He'll be all right after a little time with his father." He spoke as if the boy's father was someone else. "You forgot to give me his toys and animals and stuff. He said you packed them."

"Yes, of course." Looking offended with herself, she hurried into the apartment and came out with a blue nylon airline bag. "Give my best regards to your mother."

There was no warmth in her voice and none in his answer: "Of course."

They sounded like a couple who never expected to see each other again. A pang of fear went through me—dull, because I was used to suppressing fear. I think it was mainly fear for the boy. At any rate, I wanted to stop Broadhurst and bring the boy back. But I didn't.

Broadhurst went out to the street. I climbed the outside stairs two at a time and walked quickly along the gallery to the front. A fairly new black Ford convertible was standing at the curb. A blond girl or woman in a sleeveless yellow dress was sitting in the front seat. Her left arm was around Ronny, who seemed to be holding himself in a strained position.

Stanley Broadhurst got into the front seat. He started the engine and drove away in a hurry. I didn't get a look at the girl's face. Foreshortened by the height, she was all bare shoulders and swelling breasts and flowing blond hair.

The pang of fear I felt for the boy had become a nagging ache. I went into my bathroom and looked at my face as if I could somehow read his future there. But all I could read was my own past, in the marks of erosion under my eyes, the mica glints of white and gray in my twenty-four-hour beard.

I shaved and put on a clean shirt and started downstairs again. Halfway down I paused and leaned on the handrail and told myself that I was descending into trouble: a pretty young woman with a likable boy and a wandering husband. A hot wind was blowing in my face.

chapter 2

I WALKED PAST the closed door of the Wallers' apartment and down the street to the nearest newsstand, where I bought the weekend edition of the Los Angeles *Times*. I lugged it home and spent most of the morning reading it. All of it, including the classified ads, which sometimes tell you more about Los Angeles than the news.

I had a cold shower. Then I sat down at the desk in my front room, looked at the balance in my checkbook, and paid the phone and light bills. Neither was overdue, and it made me feel dominant and controlled.

While I was putting my checks in envelopes, I heard a woman's steps approaching the door.

"Mr. Archer?"

I opened the door. Her hair was up, and she had on a short stylish multicolored dress and white textured stockings. There was blue shadow on her eyelids and carmine lipstick on her mouth. Behind all this she looked tense and vulnerable.

"I don't want to disturb you if you're busy."

"I'm not busy. Come in."

She stepped into the room and gave it a sweeping glance which lit up its contents like radar blips, one thing after another, and made me realize that the furniture was rather worn. I closed the door behind her and pulled the chair out from the desk.

"Won't you sit down?"

"Thank you." But she remained standing. "There's a fire in Santa Teresa. A forest fire. Did you know that?"

"No, but it's fire weather."

"According to the radio report it flared up quite near to Grandma Nell's—to my mother-in-law's estate. I've been trying to get her on the

phone. Nobody answers. Ronny's supposed to be there, and I'm terribly worried."

"Why?"

She bit her lower lip and got a trace of lipstick on her teeth. "I don't trust Stanley to look after him properly. I should never have let him take Ronny away."

"Why did you?"

"I have no right to deprive Stanley of his son. And a boy needs his father's companionship."

"Not Stanley's, in his present mood."

She looked at me soberly and leaned toward me with one tentative hand extended. "Help me to get him back, Mr. Archer."

"Ronny," I said, "or Stanley?"

"Both of them. But it's Ronny I'm most concerned about. The man on the radio said they may have to evacuate some of the houses. I don't know what's going on in Santa Teresa."

She raised her hand to her forehead and covered her eyes. I led her to the chesterfield and persuaded her to sit down. Then I went out to the kitchen and rinsed a glass and filled it with water. Her throat vibrated as she drank. Her long white-stockinged dancer's legs protruded into the shabby room as if from some more theatrical dimension.

I sat at the desk, half-turned to face her. "What's your mother-in-law's number?"

She gave it to me, with the area code, and I dialed direct. The phone at the other end buzzed urgently nine or ten times.

The gentle crash of the receiver being lifted took me by surprise. A woman's voice said: "Yes?"

"Is that Mrs. Broadhurst?"

"Yes, it is." Her voice was firm but polite.

"Stanley's wife wants to talk to you. Hold on."

I handed the receiver to the young woman, and she took my place at the desk. I went into the bedroom, closing the door behind me, and picked up the extension phone by my bed.

The older woman was saying: "I haven't seen Stanley. Saturday is my Pink Lady day, as he well knows, and I just got back from the hospital."

"Aren't you expecting him?"

"Perhaps later in the day, Jean."

"But he said he had a date with you this morning, that he had promised to take Ronny to see you."

"Then I presume he will." The older woman's voice had become guarded and more precise. "I fail to see why it's so important—"

"They left here hours ago," Jean said. "And I understand there's a fire in your neighborhood."

"There is. It's why I rushed home from the hospital. You'll forgive me now if I say goodbye, Jean."

She hung up, and so did I. When I went back into the living room, Jean was frowning at the receiver in her hand, as if it was a live thing which had died on her.

"Stan lied to me," she said. "His mother was at the hospital all morning. He took that girl to an empty house."

"Are you and Stanley breaking up?"

"I guess maybe we are. *I* don't want to."

"Who is the blond girl?"

She lifted the receiver in her hand and slammed it down rather violently. I felt as if she was hanging up on me.

"We won't discuss it," she said.

I changed the subject, slightly. "How long have you and Stanley been separated?"

"Just since yesterday. We're not really separated. I thought if Stanley talked to his mother—" She paused.

"That she'd take your side? I wouldn't count on it."

She looked at me in some surprise. "Do you know Mrs. Broadhurst?"

"No. But I still wouldn't count on it. Does Mrs. Broadhurst have money?"

"Am I—is it so obvious?"

"No. But there has to be a reason for everything. Your husband sort of used his mother's name to get Ronny away from you."

It sounded like an accusation, and she bowed her head under it. "Someone's been talking to you about us."

"You have."

"But I didn't say anything about Mrs. Broadhurst. *Or* the blond."

"I thought you did."

She went into deep thought. It sat prettily on her, softening the anxious angularity of her posture. "*I* know. Last night, after I called the Wallers in Tahoe, they called you and filled you in on me. What did Laura say, or was it Bob?"

"Nothing. They didn't call me."

"Then how do you know about the blond girl?"

"Isn't there always a blond girl?"

"You're putting me on," she said in a younger voice. "And under the circumstances it isn't very nice."

"Okay. I saw her." I realized as I spoke that I was volunteering as a

witness—her witness—and my last hope or pretense of staying out of her life was being talked away. "She was in the car with them when they left here."

"Why didn't you tell me? I would have stopped them."

"How?"

"I don't know how." She looked at her hands. All of a sudden her face was disorganized by a rueful flash of humor. "I could carry a wife sign, I guess, or sit down in front of the car. Or write a letter to an astronaut."

I interrupted her before she got hysterical. "At least he's being open about it. And with the boy along, they're not likely to do anything—" I let the sentence trail off.

She shook her lovely head. "I don't know what they're likely to do. The fact that they're being so open, as you say, is one of the things that worries me. I think they're both crazy. I mean it. He brought her home from the office last night, and asked her to stay for dinner without consulting me. She was high on something when she arrived, and pretty vague in her answers."

"What kind of an office does Stanley have?"

"He works for an insurance firm in Northridge—that's where we live. She doesn't work in the office—I don't mean that. She wouldn't last a day. Possibly she's a student at the college or even a high school student. She's young enough."

"How young?"

"She can't be more than nineteen. That was one of the things that made me suspicious right off. According to Stanley, she was an old school friend who'd got in touch with him at the office. But he's at least seven or eight years older than she is."

"What was she high on?"

"I have no idea. But I didn't like the things she said to Ronny. I didn't like them at all. I asked Stanley to get rid of her. He refused. So I called Laura Waller—and came here."

"Maybe you shouldn't have."

"I know that now. I should have stayed in my own house and had it out with them. The trouble is, Stanley and I haven't been close for a long time. He's been wrapped up in his own concerns and completely uninterested in me. It sort of deprives a girl of any ground to stand on."

"Did you want out of the marriage?"

She considered the question soberly. "It never occurred to me. But maybe I do. I'll have to think about it." She stood up, leaning like a model on my desk, with one hip out. "But not now, Mr. Archer. I have to go to Santa Teresa. Will you drive me there, and help me get Ronny back?"

"I'm a private detective. I do these things for a living."

"Laura Waller told me. It's why I asked you. And of course I expect to pay you."

I opened the door and set the self-lock. "What else did Mrs. Waller tell you about me?"

She said with her bright disorganized smile: "That you were a lonely man."

chapter 3

I WAITED FOR her in the front room of the Wallers' apartment. The walls were lined with books, many of them in foreign languages, like insulation against the immediate present. She came out carrying a large handbag, and coats for herself and the absent boy.

I got my car out of the garage at the rear of the building, and we headed inland for the Ventura Freeway. The early afternoon sun glared on the traffic, flashing unpredictably on windshields and chromium. I turned up the air conditioning.

"That feels good," she said. Her presence beside me sustained an illusive feeling that there was an opening there into another time-track or dimension. It had more future than the world I knew, and not so bloody much traffic.

After I made the turn onto Sepulveda, I spent a little time preparing a remark.

"I seem to be getting less lonely, Mrs. Broadhurst."

"Call me Jean. Mrs. Broadhurst sounds like my mother-in-law."

"Is that bad?"

"Not necessarily. She's a pretty good woman—a lady, in fact, and a good sport. But underneath all that she's terribly sad. I suppose that's what manners are for, to cover up."

"What's she so sad about?"

"A lot of things." She looked at the side of my face, my one visible eye. "You're quite inquisitive, aren't you, Mr. Archer?"

"It's my working habit."

"And you're working?"

"You asked me to. Did the fact that I live where I do have anything to do with your moving in below?"

"The fact that you're a detective?"

"Roughly, yes."

"It may have. You may have been part of the whole Gestalt. Does it matter?"

"To me it does. I don't believe in coincidences. And I like to know exactly where I stand."

"You're lucky if you do."

"Is that a threat?" I said.

"It's more of a confession. I was thinking about myself—and where I stand."

"While you're confessing—did you send Ronny out this morning to help me feed the birds?"

"No." Her tone was definite. "That was his own idea." She added: "If you don't believe in coincidence, there's not much room for spontaneity, either. In your world."

"It isn't *my* world. I'm interested in the whole Gestalt you mentioned. Tell me about it."

She said haltingly: "I don't know what you want me to tell you."

"Everything that led up to this."

"You take it seriously, don't you?" I could hear the slight edge of surprise in her voice.

"Yes."

"I take it seriously, too. After all it's my life, and it's going to pieces. But as for explaining it, I wouldn't know where to begin."

"Just give me the pieces. You've already started, with Mrs. Broadhurst. What's she so sad about?"

"She's getting old."

"So am I, and I'm not sad."

"Aren't you? Anyway, it's different for a woman."

"Isn't Mr. Broadhurst getting old?"

"There is no Mr. Broadhurst. He ran away with another woman some years ago. Stanley seems to be repeating the pattern."

"How old was he when his father took off?"

"Eleven or twelve. Stanley never talks about it, but it was the main event of his childhood. I have to remember that when I'm judging him. When his father left, I think he felt even worse than his mother did."

"How do you know, if he never talks about it?"

"You ask good questions," she said.

"Give me a good answer, Jean."

She took her time. I couldn't see her face, but peripheral vision made me aware of her sitting beside me with her hands in her lap. Her head was

bowed over her empty hands as if she was trying to untie a knot or unwind a ball of string.

"My husband has been looking for his father for some time," she said, "and gradually breaking up. Or maybe I've got it turned around. He's been looking for his father in the hope that it would put him back together."

"Did Stanley have a breakdown?"

"Nothing as definite as that. But his whole life has been a kind of breakdown. He's one of those overconfident people who turns out to have no confidence at all. And it makes him stupid. He barely got through the university. As a matter of fact, that was how I met him. I was in his French class, and he hired me to tutor him." She added with a kind of ironic precision: "The tutorial relationship persisted into our marriage."

"It can be tough on a man, to be married to a woman smarter than he is."

"It can be tough on the woman, too. But I didn't say I was smarter than Stanley, exactly. He's just a man who hasn't found himself."

"Is he looking?"

"He's been looking terribly hard, for a long time."

"For his father."

"That's the way he puts it to himself. He seems to feel that when his father ran out on him, it robbed his life of its meaning. That sounds like nonsense, but it isn't really. He's angry at his father for abandoning him; at the same time he misses him and loves him. The two together can be paralyzing."

The depth of feeling in her voice surprised me. She cared for her husband more than she admitted.

We crossed the low pass and began the descent into the valley. Above its floor, layers of brown dust were stacked in the air, obscuring the mountains on the far side. Like something in an old movie, a World War Two bomber labored up from Van Nuys Airport and turned north. It was probably headed for the fire in Santa Teresa.

I didn't mention this to the woman beside me. Another thought had begun to nag at my mind. If Stanley was following in his father's footsteps and running away with a girl, he wouldn't be likely to head straight for the town where his mother lived. Las Vegas, or possibly Mexico, was a more likely destination.

We passed a "Northridge" sign. I glanced at the woman. She was bent forward, unwinding her invisible ball of string.

"How far is your house from the freeway?"

"About five minutes. Why?"

"We ought to check there. We don't know that Stanley took the boy to Santa Teresa."

"You think they may be at the house?"

"It isn't likely, but it's possible. Let's have a look, anyway."

It was on a street named College Circle, one of a group of brand new houses with two-story porticoes supported by large wooden pillars. They were differentiated by their colors. The Broadhurst house was dark blue with light blue pillars.

Jean went in at the front door. I found when I followed the driveway around to the back that behind its imposing front it was just another tract house, as if the architect had tried to combine a southern plantation mansion with the slave quarters. A grape-stake fence separated the back yard from the neighbors'.

The garage door was locked. I went around to the window at the side. The only car in the double garage, a green Mercedes sedan, bore no resemblance to the black convertible Stanley had been driving.

Jean opened the back door of the house from the inside. She gave me an appalled look, and came running across the grass to the garage window.

"They're not *in* there, are they?"

"No."

"Thank heaven. I thought for a minute they'd committed suicide or something." She stood beside me at the window. "That's not our car."

"Whose is it?"

"It must be hers. I remember now—she and Stanley came in separate cars last night. She has her nerve—leaving her car in my garage." Jean turned toward me, her face hardening. "Incidentally, she slept in Ronny's bed. I don't like that."

"Show me."

I followed her in through the back door. The house was already showing signs of abandonment. In the kitchen, unwashed dishes were piled in the sink and on the counters. On the top of the free-standing stove were a skillet half full of congealed grease and a saucepan containing something that smelled like pea soup but looked like cracked green mud. And there were flies.

The boy's room on the second floor was papered with pictures of friendly animals. The bedclothes were rumpled and twisted, as if the girl visitor had spent a troubled night. The red marks of her mouth were on the pillow, like a signature, and under the pillow was a copy of the novel *Green Mansions* bound in faded green cloth.

I examined the flyleaf of the book. It had a bookplate with an engrav-

ing of an angel or a muse writing in a scroll with a peacock-plume pen. The name on the bookplate was Ellen Strome. Under it another name was inscribed in pencil: Jerry Kilpatrick.

I closed the book and slipped it into my jacket pocket.

chapter 4

JEAN BROADHURST CAME into the room behind me. "At least he didn't sleep with her."

"Where did your husband sleep?"

"In his study."

She showed me the little room on the ground floor. It contained a few shelves of books, a closed rolltop desk, an unmade daybed, and a gray steel filing cabinet standing like a cenotaph at the head of the bed. I turned to the woman:

"Does Stanley usually sleep in here?"

"You ask some pretty personal questions."

"You'll get used to it. I take it that he does usually sleep in here."

She colored. "He's been working at night on his files. He doesn't like to disturb me."

I gave the top drawer of the filing cabinet a tentative pull. It was locked.

"What kind of files does he keep in this?"

"It's his father's file," she said.

"His father's file?"

"Stanley keeps a file on his father—everything he's been able to dig up about him, which isn't much. And all the false leads—the dozens of people he's talked to or written to, trying to find out where his father is. It's been his main occupation these last couple of years." She added wryly: "At least I've known where he was keeping himself nights."

"What sort of a man was his father?"

"I don't actually know. It's funny, with all this information"—she tapped the metal side of the filing cabinet—"Stanley doesn't really talk about him at all. He has long silences on the subject. His mother has

even longer silences. I do know he was a captain of infantry in the Pacific. Stanley has a picture of him in uniform. He was a good-looking man with a nice smile."

I looked around at the paneled plywood walls. They were empty except for a business calendar which alleged that it was still the month of June.

"Where does he keep the picture of his father?"

"In plexiglass, so it doesn't get worn out."

"What would wear it out?"

"Showing it to people. He also has pictures of him playing tennis, and riding a polo pony, and one at the wheel of his yacht."

"I gather his father had a lot of money?"

"Quite a lot. At least Mrs. Broadhurst has."

"And her husband walked out on it and her for the sake of a woman?"

"So I've been told."

"Who was the woman?"

"I have no idea. Stanley and his mother don't discuss the subject. All I know is that Mr. Broadhurst and the woman eloped to San Francisco. Stanley and I spent two weeks in San Francisco last June. Stanley tramped around the city with his pictures. He covered most of the downtown district before he was through. I had quite a time getting him to come back with us. He wanted to quit his job and go on searching the Bay area."

"Assuming he finds his father, what then?"

"I don't know. I don't think Stanley knows, either."

"You said he was eleven or twelve when his father left. How long ago was that?"

"Stanley's twenty-seven now. Fifteen years."

"Can he afford to quit his job?"

"No, he can't. We owe a good deal of money, to his mother and other people. But he's getting so irresponsible, it's all I can do to keep him on the job." She was quiet for a moment, looking at the blank walls of the room, the calendar which hadn't been changed in several months.

I said: "Do you have a key to the filing cabinet?"

"No. There's only the one, and Stanley keeps it. He keeps the rolltop desk locked, too. He doesn't like me to look at his correspondence."

"Do you think he's been corresponding with the girl?"

"I have no idea. He gets letters from all over. I don't open them."

"What's her name, do you know?"

"She said her name was Sue, at least she told Ronny that."

"I'd like to take a look at the registration of that Mercedes. What about a key to the garage?"

"That I have. I keep it in the kitchen."

I followed her out to the kitchen, where she opened a cupboard and took the key off a nail. I used it to open up the garage. The key of the Mercedes was in the ignition. There was no registration, but crumpled in the back of the dash compartment I found an auto insurance invoice made out to a Mr. Roger Armistead of 10 Crescent Drive in Santa Teresa. I copied the name and address in my black notebook and climbed out of the car.

"What did you find?" Jean said.

I showed her my open notebook. "Do you know Roger Armistead?"

"I'm afraid not. Crescent Drive is a good address, though."

"And that Mercedes is worth a lot of money. Stanley's old school friend seems to be loaded. Or else she stole it."

Jean made a quick quelling motion with her hand. "Please don't talk so loudly." She went on in a voice that was conscious of the neighbors beyond the grape-stake fence: "That story of his was ridiculous. She couldn't possibly be his old school friend. She's at least six or seven years younger, as I said. Besides, he attended a private boys' school in Santa Teresa."

I flipped open my notebook again. "Give me a description of her."

"She's a good-looking blond girl, about my height, five foot six. Nice figure. Perhaps she weighs 115 pounds or so. Her eyes are a shade of blue. They're her best feature, really—and also her strangest."

"Strange in what way?"

"I couldn't read them," she said. "I couldn't tell if she was absolutely innocent or absolutely cold and amoral. That isn't an afterthought, either. It was my first reaction when she came in with Stanley."

"Did he give any clue as to why he brought her home with him?"

"He said she needed food and rest, and he expected me to serve her dinner. Which I did. But she hardly ate a thing -a little pea soup."

"Did she talk much?"

"Not to me. She talked to Ronny."

"What about?"

"It was nonsense talk, really. She told him a wild story about a little girl who was left alone all night in a house in the mountains. Her parents were killed by monsters and the little girl was carried off by a big bird like a condor. She said that had happened to her when she was his age. She asked my son if he would like it to happen to him. It was fantasy, of course, but it had an ugly element, as if she was trying to unload her hysteria on Ronny."

"What was his reaction? Was he frightened?"

"Not exactly. He seemed to be kind of fascinated by her. I was not. I broke it up and sent him to his room."

"Did she say anything about taking him away?"

"She didn't say it directly. But that was the message, wasn't it? It scared me at the time. I should have acted on it and got rid of her."

"What scared you?"

She looked up at the sky, which was full of blowing dust. "She was afraid, I think, and I caught it from her. Of course, I was upset already. It was so unusual for Stanley to do what he did, bringing her home like some kind of child bride. I realized that here my life was changing, and there was nothing I could do about it."

"It's been changing for some time, hasn't it? Since June."

Her gaze came down, full of darkened sky. "June was the month we went to San Francisco. Why do *you* say June?"

"It was the last month your husband tore off the calendar in his study."

A car with a noisy engine pulled up in front, and a man appeared at the corner of the house. His body seemed ill at ease in his dark rumpled suit. His long pale face had cornices of scar tissue over the eyes.

He came toward us along the driveway. "Is Stanley Broadhurst here?"

"I'm afraid he isn't," Jean said uneasily.

"Would you be Mrs. Broadhurst, by any chance?" The man spoke with elaborate politeness, but an undertone of aggression buzzed in his voice.

"Yes, I'm Mrs. Broadhurst."

"When do you expect your husband back?"

"I really don't know."

"You must have a rough idea."

"I'm afraid I don't."

"If you don't, who does?"

He sounded like a man who was full of trouble. I stepped between him and Jean:

"Broadhurst's left town for the weekend. Who are you and what do you want?"

The man didn't answer me right away. He went into an intense quiet rage, swinging his hand up and slapping his own face. The blow left a four-fingered mark burning red on his cheek.

"Who I am is my concern," he said. "I want my money. You better get in touch and tell him that. I'm blowing this town tonight and taking the money with me."

"What money are you talking about?"

"That's between he and I. Just give him the message. I'm willing to take the even thousand if I get it by tonight. Otherwise the sky will be the limit. Tell him that."

His cold eyes didn't believe what his mouth was saying. I guessed he was an old con. He had the prison pallor, and he appeared ill at ease in the open daylight. He was sticking close to the wall as if he needed something to contain him.

"My husband doesn't have that kind of money."

"His mother has."

"What do you know about his mother?" Jean said in a thin voice.

"I happen to know she's loaded. He said he'd get it from her today and have it for me tonight."

I said: "You're a little early, aren't you?"

"It's a good thing I am, with him out of town and all."

"What's he buying from you?"

"If I told you, I couldn't sell it, could I?" He gave me the tricky look of a half-smart man who had never learned the limits of his own intelligence. "Tell him I'll be back here tonight. If he don't pay me then, the sky's the limit."

"There may not be anyone here then," I said. "Why don't you give me your name and address, and we'll get in touch with you?"

He considered my proposal, and finally said: "You can reach me at the Star Motel. That's below Topanga Canyon on the coast highway. Ask for Al."

I made a note of the address. "No phone?"

"You can't deliver money over the phone."

He gave us a dim eroded smile and went. I followed him to the corner of the house and watched him drive off in an old black Volkswagen. It had a missing front fender and a license plate so dirty I couldn't read it.

"Do you think he's telling the truth?" Jean said.

"I doubt if he knows, himself. He'd have to take a lie-detector test to find out. And he'd probably flunk it."

"What's Stanley doing with that kind of person?"

"You know Stanley better than I do."

"I'm beginning to wonder."

We went into the house, and I asked Jean's permission to use the phone in the study again. I wanted to get in touch with the owner of the Mercedes. Santa Teresa Information gave me Armistead's number, and I dialed it.

A woman's voice answered impatiently: "Yes?"

"May I talk to Mr. Armistead?"

"He isn't here."

"Where can I find him?"

"That depends on what you want him for," she said.

"Are you Mrs. Armistead?"

"Yes." She sounded ready to hang up on me.

"I'm trying to trace a young woman. An unnatural blond—"

She cut in in a much more interested voice: "Did she spend Thursday night on a yacht in the Santa Teresa marina?"

"I don't know."

"What *do* you know about her?"

"She was driving a green Mercedes. Apparently it's your husband's."

"It's *my* car. It's my yacht, too, for that matter. Did she wreck the Mercedes?"

"No."

"I want it back. Where is it?"

"I'll tell you if you let me come and talk to you."

"Is this some kind of a shakedown? Did Roger put you up to this?" There was a tremolo of anger and hurt in her voice.

"I've never seen him in my life."

"Count yourself fortunate. What's your name?"

"Archer."

"What do you do for a living, Mr. Archer?"

"I'm a private detective."

"I see. And what do you want to talk to me about?"

"The blond girl. I don't know her name. Do you?"

"No. Is she in trouble?"

"She seems to be."

"How old is she?"

"Eighteen or nineteen."

"I see," she said in a smaller, thinner voice. "Did Roger give her the car, or was it stolen?"

"You'll have to ask Roger. Shall I bring you the car?"

"Where are you calling from?"

"Northridge, but I'm on my way to Santa Teresa. We can have a talk, perhaps."

There was a short silence. I asked Mrs. Armistead if she was there.

"I'm here. But I'm not sure I want to talk to you. However," she added in a stronger voice, "the car belongs to me and I want it back. I'm willing to pay you, reasonably."

"We'll discuss that when I see you."

I backed the Mercedes out of the garage and put my car in its place. When I made my way back to the study, Jean was talking again on the phone to her mother-in-law.

She set the receiver down and told me that Stanley and Ronny and the girl had visited the ranch that morning in Mrs. Broadhurst's absence. "The gardener gave them the key to the Mountain House."

"What's that?"

"A guest cabin in the hills back of the ranch. Where the fire is."

chapter 5

BEFORE WE REACHED Santa Teresa I could smell smoke. Then I could see it dragging like a veil across the face of the mountain behind the city.

Under and through the smoke I caught glimpses of fire like the flashes of heavy guns too far away to be heard. The illusion of war was completed by an old two-engine bomber which flew in low over the mountain's shoulder. The plane was lost in the smoke for a long instant, then climbed out trailing a pastel red cloud of fire retardant.

On the freeway ahead the traffic thickened rapidly and stopped us. I reached over to turn on the car radio but then decided not to. The woman beside me had enough on her mind without having to listen to fire reports.

At the head of the line, a highway patrolman was directing the movement of traffic from a side road onto the freeway. There were quite a few cars coming down out of the hills, many of them with Santa Teresa College decals. I noticed several trucks piled with furniture and mattresses, children and dogs.

When the patrolman let us pass, we turned onto the road that led to the hills. It took us in a gradual climb between lemon groves and subdivisions toward what Jean described as Mrs. Broadhurst's canyon.

A man wearing a Forest Service jacket and a yellow hard hat stopped the Mercedes at the entrance to the canyon. Jean climbed out and introduced herself as Mrs. Broadhurst's daughter-in-law.

"I hope you're not planning to stay, ma'am. We may have to evacuate this area."

"Have you seen my husband and little boy?" She described Ronny—six years old, blue-eyed, black-haired, wearing a light-blue suit.

He shook his head. "I've seen a lot of people leaving with their kids.

It isn't a bad idea. Once the fire starts spilling down one of these canyons she can outrace you."

"How bad is it?" I said.

"It depends on the wind. If the wind stays quiet we could get her fully contained before nightfall. We've got a lot of equipment up on the mountain. But if she starts to blow —" He lifted his hand in a kind of resigned goodbye to everything in sight.

We drove into the canyon between fieldstone gate posts emblazoned with the name Canyon Estates. New and expensive houses were scattered along the canyonside among the oaks and boulders. Men and women with hoses were watering their yards and buildings and the surrounding brush. Their children were watching them, or sitting quietly in cars, ready to go. The smoke towering up from the mountain stood over them like a threat and changed the color of the light.

The Broadhurst ranch lay between these houses and the fire. We went up the canyon toward it, and left the county road at Mrs. Broadhurst's mailbox. Her private asphalt lane wound through acres of mature avocado trees. Their broad leaves were shriveling at the tips as if the fire had already touched them. Darkening fruit hung down from their branches like green hand grenades.

The lane broadened into a circular drive in front of a large and simple white stucco ranchhouse. Under the deep porch, red fuchsias dripped from hanging redwood baskets. At a red glass hummingbird feeder suspended among the baskets, a hummingbird which also seemed suspended was sipping from a spout and treading air.

The bird didn't move perceptibly when a woman opened the screen door and came out. She had on a white shirt and dark slacks which showed off her narrow waist. She moved across the veranda with rapid disciplined energy, making the high heels of her riding boots click.

"Jean darling."

"Mother."

They shook hands briefly like competitors before a match of some kind. Mrs. Broadhurst's neat dark head was touched with gray, but she was younger than I'd imagined, no more than fifty or so.

Only her eyes looked older. Without moving them from Jean's face, she shook her head from side to side.

"No, they haven't come back. And they haven't been seen in the area for some time. Who's the blond girl?"

"I don't know."

"Is Stanley having an affair with her?"

"I don't know, Mother." She turned to me. "This is Mr. Archer."

Mrs. Broadhurst nodded curtly. "Jean mentioned on the telephone that you're some kind of detective. Is that correct?"

"The private kind."

She raked me with a look that moved from my eyes down to my shoes and back up to my face again. "I've never set much store by private detectives, frankly. But under the circumstances perhaps you can be useful. If the radio can be believed, the fire has passed the Mountain House and left it untouched. Would you like to come up there with me?"

"I would. After I talk to the gardener."

"That won't be necessary."

"But I understand he gave your son a key to the Mountain House. He may know why they wanted it."

"He doesn't. I've questioned Fritz. We're wasting time, and I've already wasted a good deal. I stayed by the telephone until you and Jean got here."

"Where is Fritz?"

"You're persistent, aren't you? He may be in the lath house."

We left Jean standing white-faced and apprehensive in the shadow of the veranda. The lath house was in a walled garden behind one wing of the ranchhouse. Mrs. Broadhurst followed me in under the striped shadows cast by the roof.

"Fritz? Mr. Archer wants to ask you a question."

A soft-looking man in dungarees straightened up from the plants he was tending. He had emotional green eyes and a skittish way of holding his body, as if he was ready to avoid a threatened blow. There was a livid scar connecting his mouth and his nose which looked as if he had been born with a harelip.

"What is it this time?" he said.

"I'm trying to find out what Stanley Broadhurst is up to. Why do you think he wanted the key to the guest house?"

Fritz shrugged his thick loose shoulders. "I don't know. I can't read people's minds, can I?"

"You must have some idea."

He glanced uncomfortably at Mrs. Broadhurst. "Am I supposed to spit it all out?"

"Please tell the truth," she said in a forced tone.

"Well, naturally I thought him and the chick had hanky-panky in mind. Why else would they want to go up there?"

"With my grandson along?" Mrs. Broadhurst said.

"They wanted me to keep the boy with me. But I didn't want the responsibility. That's the way you get in trouble," he said with stupid wisdom.

"You didn't mention that before. You should have told me, Fritz."

"I can't remember everything at once, can I?"

"How was the boy behaving?" I asked him.

"Okay. He didn't say much."

"Neither do you."

"What do you want me to say? You think I did something to the boy?" His voice rose, and his eyes grew moist and suddenly overflowed.

"Nobody suggested anything like that."

"Then why do you keep at me and at me? The boy was here with his father. His father took him away. Does that make me responsible?"

"Take it easy."

Mrs. Broadhurst touched my arm. "We're getting nowhere."

We left the gardener complaining among his plants. The striped shadow fell from the roof, jailbirding him.

The carport was attached to an old red barn at the back of the house. Below the barn was a dry creekbed at the bottom of a shallow ravine which was thickly grown with oaks and eucalyptus. Band-tailed pigeons and sweet-voiced red-winged blackbirds were foraging under the trees and around a feeder. I stepped on fallen eucalyptus pods which looked like ornate bronze nailheads set in the dust.

An aging Cadillac and an old pickup truck stood under the carport. Mrs. Broadhurst drove the pickup, wrestling it angrily around the curves in the avocado grove and turning left on the road toward the mountains. Beyond the avocados were ancient olive trees, and beyond them was pasture gone to brush.

We were approaching the head of the canyon. The smell of burning grew stronger in my nostrils. I felt as though we were going against nature, but I didn't mention my qualms to Mrs. Broadhurst. She wasn't the sort of woman you confessed human weakness to.

The road degenerated as we climbed. It was narrow and inset with boulders. Mrs. Broadhurst jerked at the wheel of the truck as if it was a male animal resisting control. For some reason I was reminded of Mrs. Roger Armistead's voice on the phone, and I asked Mrs. Broadhurst if she knew the woman.

She answered shortly: "I've seen her at the beach club. Why do you ask?"

"The Armistead name came up in connection with your son's friend, the blond girl."

"How?"

"She was using their Mercedes."

"I'm not surprised at the connection. The Armisteads are *nouveaux riches* from down south—not my kind of people." Without really chang-

ing the subject, she went on: "We've lived here for quite a long time, you know. My grandfather Falconer's ranch took in a good part of the coastal plain and the whole mountainside, all the way to the top of the first range. All I have left is a few hundred acres."

While I was trying to think of an appropriate comment, she said in a more immediate voice: "Stanley phoned me last night and asked me for fifteen hundred dollars cash, today."

"What for?"

"He said something vague, about buying information. As you may or may not know, my son is somewhat hipped on the subject of his father's desertion." Her voice was dry and careful.

"His wife told me that."

"Did she? It occurred to me that the fifteen hundred dollars might have something to do with you."

"It doesn't." I thought of Al, the pale man in the dark suit, but decided not to bring him up right now.

"Who's paying you?" the woman said rather sharply.

"I haven't been paid."

"I see." She sounded as if she distrusted what she saw. "Are you and my daughter-in-law good friends?"

"I met her this morning. We have friends in common."

"Then you probably know that Stanley and she have been close to breaking up. I never did think that their marriage would last."

"Why?"

"Jean is an intelligent girl but she comes from an entirely different class. I don't believe she's ever understood my son, though I've tried to explain something about our family traditions." She turned her head from the road to glance at me. "Is Stanley really interested in this blond girl?"

"Obviously he is, but maybe not in the way you mean. He wouldn't have brought your grandson along—"

"Don't be too sure of that. He brought Ronny because he knows I love the boy, and because he wants money from me. Remember when he found I wasn't here, he tried to leave Ronny with Fritz. I'd give a lot to know what they're up to."

chapter 6

AT THE BASE of a sandstone bluff where the road petered out entirely, she stopped the pickup and we got out.

"This is where we shift to shanks' mare," she said. "Ordinarily we could have driven around by way of Rattlesnake Road, but that's where they're fighting the fire."

In the lee of the bluff was a brown wooden sign, "Falconer Trail." The trail was a dusty track bulldozed out of the steep side of the canyon. As Mrs. Broadhurst went up ahead of me, she explained that her father had given the land for the trail to the Forest Service. She sounded as if she was trying to cheer herself in any way she could.

I ate her dust until I was looking down into the tops of the tallest sycamores in the canyon below. A daytime moon hung over the bluff, and we went on climbing toward it. When we reached the top I was wet under my clothes.

About a hundred yards back from the edge, a large weathered redwood cabin stood against a grove of trees. Some of the trees had been blackened and maimed where the fire had burned an erratic swath through the grove. The cabin itself was partly red and looked as if it had been splashed with blood.

Beyond the trees was a black hillside where the fire had browsed. The hillside slanted up to a ridge road and continued rising beyond the ridge to where the fire was now. It seemed to be moving laterally across the face of the mountain. The flames that from a distance had looked like artillery flashes were crashing through the thick chaparral like cavalry.

The ridge road was about midway between us and the main body of the fire. Toward the east, where the foothills flattened out into a mesa, the road curved down toward a collection of buildings which looked like a

small college. Between them and the fire, bulldozers were crawling back and forth on the face of the mountain, cutting a firebreak in the deep brush.

The road was clogged with tanker trucks and other heavy equipment. Men stood around them in waiting attitudes, as if by behaving modestly and discreetly they could make the fire stay up on the mountain and die there, like an unwanted god.

As Mrs. Broadhurst and I approached the cabin I could see that part of its walls and roof had been splashed from the air with red fire retardant. The rest of the walls and the shutters over the windows were weathered gray.

The door was hanging open, with the key in the Yale lock. Mrs. Broadhurst walked up to it slowly, as if she dreaded what she might find inside. But there was nothing unusual to be seen in the big rustic front room. The ashes in the stone fireplace were cold, and might have been cold for years. Pieces of old-fashioned furniture draped with canvas stood around like formless images of the past.

Mrs. Broadhurst sat down heavily on a canvas-covered armchair. Dust rose around her. She coughed and spoke in a different voice, low and ashamed:

"I came up the trail a little too fast, I'm afraid."

I went out to the kitchen to get her some water. There were cups in the cupboard, but when I turned on the tap in the tin sink no water came. The butane stove was disconnected, too.

I walked through the other rooms while I was at it: two downstairs bedrooms and a sleeping loft which was reached by steep wooden stairs. The loft was lit by a dormer window, and there were three beds in it, covered with canvas. One of them looked rumpled. I stripped the canvas off it. On the heavy gray blanket underneath there was a Rorschach blot of blood which looked recent but not fresh.

I went down to the big front room. Mrs. Broadhurst had rested her head against the back of the chair. Her closed face was smooth and peaceful, and she was snoring gently.

I heard the rising roar of a plane coming in low over the mountain. I went out the back door in time to see its red spoor falling on the fire. The plane grew smaller, its roar diminuendoed.

Two deer—a doe and a fawn —came down the slope in a dry creek channel, heading for the grove. They saw me and rockinghorsed over a fallen log into the trees.

From the rear of the cabin a washed-out gravel lane overgrown with weeds meandered toward the ridge road. Starting along the lane toward the trees, I noticed wheel tracks in the weeds leading off toward a small

stable. The wheel tracks looked new, and I could see only one set of them.

I followed them to the stable and peered in. A black convertible that looked like Stanley's stood there with the top down. I found the registration in the dash compartment. It was Stanley's all right.

I slammed the door of the convertible. A noise that sounded like an echo or a response came from the direction of the trees. Perhaps it was the crack of a stick breaking. I went out and headed for the partly burned grove. All I could hear was the sound of my own footsteps and a faint sighing which came from the wind in the trees.

Then I made out a more distant noise which I didn't recognize. It sounded like the whirring of wings. I felt hot wind on my face, and glanced up the slope.

The wall of smoke that hung above the fire was leaning out from the mountain. At its base the fire was burning more brightly and had changed direction. Outriders of flame were leaping down the slope to the left, and firemen were moving along the ridge road to meet them.

The wind was changing. I could hear it rattling now among the leaves—the same sound that had wakened me in West Los Angeles early that morning. There were human noises, too—sounds of movement among the trees.

"Stanley?" I said.

A man in a blue suit and a red hard hat stepped out from behind the blotched trunk of a sycamore. He was a big man, and he moved with a kind of clumsy lightness.

"Looking for somebody?" He had a quiet cool voice, which gave the effect of holding itself in reserve.

"Several people."

"I'm the only one around," he said pleasantly.

His heavy arms and thighs bulged through his business clothes. His face was wet, and there was dirt on his shoes. He took off his hard hat, wiping his face and forehead with a bandana handkerchief. His hair was gray and clipped short, like fur on a cannonball.

I walked toward him, into the skeletal shadow of the sycamore. The smoky moon was lodged in its top, segmented by small black branches. With a quick conjurer's motion, the big man produced a pack of cigarettes from his breast pocket and thrust it toward me.

"Smoke?"

"No thanks. I don't smoke."

"Don't smoke cigarettes, you mean?"

"I gave them up."

"What about cigars?"

"I never liked them," I said. "Are you taking a poll?"

"You might call it that." He smiled broadly, revealing several gold teeth. "How about cigarillos? Some people smoke them instead of cigarettes."

"I've noticed that."

"These people you say you're looking for, do any of them smoke cigarillos?"

"I don't think so." Then I remembered that Stanley Broadhurst did. "Why?"

"No reason. I'm just curious." He glanced up the mountainside. "That fire is starting to move. I don't like the feel of the wind. It has the feel of a Santa Ana."

"It was blowing down south early this morning."

"So I've heard. Are you from Los Angeles?"

"That's right." He seemed to have all the time he needed, but I was tired of fooling around with him. "My name is Archer. I'm a licensed private detective, employed by the Broadhurst family."

"I was wondering. I saw you come out of the stable."

"Stanley Broadhurst's car is in there."

"I know," he said. "Is Stanley Broadhurst one of the people you're looking for?"

"Yes, he is."

"License?"

I showed him my photostat.

"Well, I may be able to help you."

He turned abruptly and moved in among the trees along a rutted trail. I followed him. The leaves were so dry under my feet that it was like walking on cornflakes.

We came to an opening in the trees. The big sycamore which partly overarched it had been burned. Smoke was still rising from its charred branches and from the undergrowth behind it.

Near the middle of the open space there was a hole in the ground between three and four feet in diameter. A spade stood upright beside it in a pile of dirt and stones. Off to one side of the pile, a pickax lay on the ground. Its sharp tip seemed to have been dipped in dark red paint. Reluctantly I looked down into the hole.

In its shallow depth a man's body lay curled like a foetus, face upturned. I recognized his peppermint-striped shirt, glad rags to be buried in. And in spite of the dirt that stuffed his open mouth and clung to his eyes, I recognized Stanley Broadhurst, and I said so.

The big man absorbed the information quietly. "What was he doing here, do you know?"

"No. I don't. But I believe this is part of his family's ranch. You haven't explained what you're doing here."

"I'm with the Forest Service. My name's Joe Kelsey, I'm trying to find out what started this fire. And," he added deliberately, "I think I have found out. It seems to have flared up in this immediate area. I came across *this*, right there." He indicated a yellow plastic marker stuck in the burned-over ground a few feet from where we were standing. Then he produced a small aluminum evidence case and snapped it open. It contained a single half-burned cigarillo.

"Did Broadhurst smoke these?"

"I saw him smoke one this morning. You'll probably find the package in his clothes."

"Yeah, but I didn't want to move him until the coroner sees him. It looks as if I may have to, though."

He squinted uphill toward the fire. It blazed like a displaced sunset through the trees. The black silhouettes of men fighting it looked small and futile in spite of their tanker trucks and bulldozers. Off to the left the fire had spilled over the ridge and was pouring downhill like fuming acid eating the dry brush. Its smoke blew ahead of it and spread across the city toward the sea.

Kelsey took the spade and started to throw dirt into the hole, talking as he worked.

"I hate to bury a man twice, but it's better than letting him get roasted. The fire's coming back this way."

"Was he buried when you found him?"

"That's correct. But whoever buried him didn't do much of a job of covering up. I found the spade and the pick with the blood on it—and then the filled hole with loose dirt around. So I started digging. I didn't know what I was going to find. But I sort of had a feeling that it would be a dead man with a hole in his head."

Kelsey worked rapidly. The dirt covered Stanley's striped shirt and his upturned insulted face. Kelsey spoke to me over his shoulder:

"You mentioned that you were looking for several people. Who are the others?"

"The dead man's little boy is one. And there was a blond girl with him."

"So I've heard. Can you describe her?"

"Blue eyes, five foot six, 115 pounds, age about eighteen. Broadhurst's widow can tell you more about her. She's at the ranchhouse."

"Where's your car? I came out on a fire truck."

I told him that Stanley's mother had brought me in her pickup, and that she was in the cabin. Kelsey stopped spading dirt. His face was running with sweat, and mildly puzzled.

"What's she doing in there?"

"Resting."

"We're going to have to interrupt her rest."

Beyond the grove, in the unburned brush, the fire had grown almost as tall as the trees. The air moved in spurts and felt like hot animal breath.

We ran away from it, with Kelsey carrying the spade and me carrying the bloody pick. The pick felt heavy by the time we reached the door of the cabin. I set it down and knocked on the door before I went in.

Mrs. Broadhurst sat up with a start. Her face was rosy. Sleep clung to her eyes and furred her voice:

"I must have dozed off, forgive me, but I had the sweetest dream. I spent—we spent our honeymoon here, you know, right in this cabin. It was during the war, quite early in the war, and traveling wasn't possible. I dreamed that I was on my honeymoon, and none of the bad things had happened."

Her half-dreaming eyes focused on my face and recognized the signs, which I couldn't conceal, of another bad thing that had happened. Then she saw Kelsey with the spade in his hands. He looked like a giant gravedigger blocking the light in the doorway.

Mrs. Broadhurst's normal expression, competent and cool and rather strained, forced itself down over her open face. She got up very quickly, and almost lost her balance.

"Mr. Kelsey? It's Mr. Kelsey, isn't it? What's happened?"

"We found your son, ma'am."

"Where is he? I want to talk to him."

Kelsey said in deep embarrassment: "I'm afraid that won't be possible, ma'am."

"Why? Has he gone somewhere?"

Kelsey gave me an appealing look. Mrs. Broadhurst walked toward him.

"What are you doing with that spade? That's my spade, isn't it?"

"I wouldn't know, ma'am."

She took it out of his hands. "It most certainly is. I bought it for my own use last spring. Where did you get hold of it, from my gardener?"

"I found it in the clump of trees yonder." Kelsey gestured in that direction.

"What on earth was it doing there?"

Kelsey's mouth opened and shut. He was unwilling or afraid to tell her that Stanley was dead. I moved toward her and told her that her son had been killed, probably with a pickax.

I stepped outside and showed her the pickax. "Is this yours, too?"

She looked at it dully. "Yes, I believe it is."

Her voice was a low monotone, hardly more than a whisper. She turned and began to run toward the burning trees, stumbling in her high-heeled riding boots. Kelsey ran after her, heavily and rapidly like a bear. He took her around the waist and lifted her off her feet and turned her around away from the fire.

She kicked and shouted: "Let me go. I want my son."

"He's in a hole in the ground, ma'am. You can't go in there now, nobody can. But his body won't burn, it's safe underground."

She twisted in his arms and struck at his face. He dropped her. She fell in the brown weeds, beating at the ground and crying that she wanted her son.

I got down on my knees beside her and talked her into getting up and coming with us. We went down the trail in single file, with Kelsey leading the way and Mrs. Broadhurst between us. I stayed close behind her, in case she tried to do something wild like throwing herself down the side of the bluff. She moved passively with her head down, like a prisoner between guards.

chapter 7

KELSEY CARRIED THE spade in one hand and the bloody pickax in the other. He tossed them into the back of the truck and helped Mrs. Broadhurst into the cab. I took the wheel.

She rode between us in silence, looking straight ahead along the stony road. She didn't utter a sound until we turned at her mailbox into the avocado grove. Then she let out a gasp which sounded as if she'd been holding her breath all the way down the canyon.

"Where is my grandson?"

"We don't know," Kelsey said.

"You mean that he's dead, too. Is that what you mean?"

Kelsey took refuge in a southwestern drawl which helped to soften his answer. "I mean that nobody's seen hide nor hair of him, ma'am."

"What about the blond girl? Where is she?"

"I only wish I knew."

"Did she kill my son?"

"It looks like it, ma'am. It looks like she hit him over the head with that pickax."

"And buried him?"

"He was buried when I found him."

"How could a girl do that?"

"It was a shallow grave, ma'am. Girls can do about anything boys can do when they set their minds to it."

A whine had entered Kelsey's drawl under the pressure of her questioning and the greater pressure of her fear. Impatiently she turned to me:

"Mr. Archer, is my grandson Ronny dead?"

"No." I said it with some force, to beat back the possibility that he was.

"Has that girl abducted him?"

"It's a good assumption to work on. But they may simply have run away from the fire."

"You know that isn't so." She sounded as if she had crossed a watershed in her life, beyond which nothing good could happen.

I stopped the pickup behind my car on the driveway. Kelsey got out and offered to help Mrs. Broadhurst. She pushed his hands away. But she climbed out like a woman overtaken by sudden age.

"You can park the truck in the carport," she said to me. "I don't like to leave it out in the sun."

"Excuse me," Kelsey said, "but you might as well leave it out here. The fire's coming down the canyon, and it may get to your house. I'll help you bring your things out if you like, and drive one of your cars."

Mrs. Broadhurst cast a slow look around at the house and its surroundings. "There's never been fire in this canyon in my lifetime."

"That means it's ripe," he said. "The brush up above is fifteen and twenty feet deep, and as dry as a chip. This is a fifty-year fire. It could take your house unless the wind changes again."

"Then let it."

Jean came to meet us at the door, a little tardily, as if she dreaded what we were going to say. I told her that her husband was dead and that her son was missing. The two women exchanged a questioning look, as if each of them was looking into the other for the source of all their troubles. Then they came together in the doorway and stood in each other's arms.

Kelsey came up behind me on the porch. He tipped his hard hat and spoke to the younger woman, who was facing him over Mrs. Broadhurst's shoulder.

"Mrs. Stanley Broadhurst?"

"Yes."

"I understand you can give me a description of the girl who was with your husband,"

"I can try."

She separated herself from the older woman, who went into the house. Jean rested on the railing near the hummingbird feeder. A hummingbird buzzed her. She moved to the other side of the porch and sat on a canvas chair, leaning forward in a strained position and repeating for Kelsey her description of the blue-eyed blond girl with the strange eyes.

"And you say she's eighteen or so?"

Jean nodded. Her reactions were quick but mechanical, as if her mind was focused somewhere else.

"Is was your husband interested in her, Mrs. Broadhurst?"

"Obviously he was," she said in a dry bitter voice. "But I gathered she was more interested in my son."

"Interested in what way?"

"I don't know what way."

Kelsey switched to a less sensitive line of questioning. "How was she dressed?"

"Last night she had on a sleeveless yellow dress. I didn't see her this morning."

"I did," I put in. "She was still wearing the yellow dress. I assume you'll be giving all this to the police."

"Yessir, I will. Right now I want to talk to the gardener. He may be able to tell us how that spade and pick got up on the mountain. What's his name?"

"Frederick Snow—we call him Fritz," Jean said. "He isn't here."

"Where is he?"

"He rode Stanley's old bicycle down the road about half an hour ago, when the wind changed. He wanted to take the Cadillac, but I told him not to."

"Doesn't he have a car of his own?"

"I believe he has some kind of jalopy."

"Where is it?"

She shrugged slightly. "I don't know."

"Where was Fritz this morning?"

"I can't tell you. He seems to have been the only one here for most of the morning."

Kelsey's face saddened. "How does he get along with your little boy?"

"Fine." Then his meaning entered her eyes and darkened them. She shook her head as if to deny the meaning, dislodge the darkness. "Fritz wouldn't hurt Ronny, he's always been kind to him."

"Then why did he take off?"

"He said that he was worried about his mother. But I think he was scared of the fire. He was almost crying."

"So am I scared of the fire," Kelsey said. "It's why I'm in this business."

"Are you a policeman?" Jean said. "Is that why you're asking me all these questions?"

"I'm with the Forest Service, assigned to investigate the causes of fires." He dug into an inside pocket, produced the aluminum evidence case, and showed her the half-burned cigarillo. "Does this look like one of your husband's?"

"Yes it does. But surely you're not trying to prove that he started it. What's the point if he's dead?" Her voice had risen a little out of control.

"The point is this. Whoever killed him probably made him drop this in the dry grass. That means they're legally and financially responsible for the fire. And it's my job to establish the facts. Where does this man Snow live?"

"With his mother. I think their house is quite near here. My mother-in-law can tell you. Mrs. Snow used to work for her."

We found Mrs. Broadhurst in the living room, standing at a corner window which framed the canyon. The room was so large that she looked small at the far end of it. She didn't turn when we moved up to her.

She was watching the progress of the fire. It was in the head of the canyon now, slipping downhill like a loose volcano, and spouting smoke and sparks above the treetops. The eucalyptus trees behind the house were momentarily blanched by the gusty wind. The blackbirds and pigeons had all gone.

Kelsey and I exchanged glances. It was time that we went, too. I let him do the talking, since it was his territory and his kind of emergency. He addressed the woman's unmoving back:

"Mrs. Broadhurst? Don't you think we better get out of here?"

"You go. Please do go. I'm staying, for the present."

"You can't do that. That fire is really on its way."

She turned on him. Her face had sunk on its bones; it made her look old and formidable.

"Don't tell me what I can or can't do. I was born in this house. I've never lived anywhere else. If the house goes, I might as well go with it. Everything else has gone."

"You're not serious, ma'am."

"Am I not?"

"You don't want to get yourself burned, do you?"

"I think I'd almost welcome the flames. I'm very cold, Mr. Kelsey."

Her tone was tragic, but there was a note of hysteria running through it, or something worse. A stubbornness which could mean that her mind had slipped a notch, and stuck at a crazy angle.

Kelsey cast a desperate look around the room. It was full of Victorian furniture, with dark Victorian portraits on the walls, and several cabinets full of stuffed native birds under glass.

"Don't you want to save your things, ma'am? Your silver and bird specimens and pictures and mementos?"

She spread her hands in a hopeless gesture as if everything had long since run through them. Kelsey was getting nowhere trying to sell her back the pieces of her life.

I said:

"We need your help, Mrs. Broadhurst."

She looked at me in mild surprise. "My help?"

"Your grandson is missing. This is a bad time and place for a little boy to be lost—"

"It's a judgment on me."

"That's nonsense."

"So I'm talking nonsense, am I?"

I disregarded her angry question. "Fritz the gardener may know where he is. I believe you know his mother. Is that correct?"

Her answer came slowly. "Edna Snow used to be my housekeeper. You can't seriously believe that Fritz—" she stopped, unwilling to put her question into words.

"It would be a great help if you'd come along and talk to Fritz and his mother."

"Very well, I will."

We drove out the lane like a funeral cortege. Mrs. Broadhurst was leading in her Cadillac. Jean and I came next in the green Mercedes. Kelsey brought up the rear, driving the pickup.

I looked back from the mailbox. Sparks and embers were blowing down the canyon, plunging into the trees behind the house like bright exotic birds taking the place of the birds that had flown.

chapter 8

THE RESIDENTIAL DISTRICT called Canyon Estates had been almost depopulated. A few men were up on their roofs with running hoses and defiant expressions.

Two roads crossed at the mouth of the canyon, and Mrs. Broadhurst took the right-hand turn. The neighborhood changed abruptly. Black and Chicano children stood beside the road and watched us go by as if we were a procession of foreign dignitaries.

Mrs. Snow lived in an old stucco cottage on a street of old stucco cottages made almost beautiful by flowering jacaranda trees. Kelsey and I and Mrs. Broadhurst went to the door. Jean stayed in the Mercedes.

"I don't trust myself," she said.

Mrs. Snow was a quick-moving gray-haired woman wearing a fussy black outfit which looked as if she had dressed for the occasion. The eyes behind her rimless spectacles were dark, and hardened by anxiety.

"Mrs. Broadhurst! What brings you here?" Her voice hurried on as if she didn't really want to know: "It's very nice to see you. Won't you come in?"

The door opened directly into the meager front room, and we went in. Mrs. Broadhurst introduced Kelsey and me. But Mrs. Snow's scared eyes refused to look at us, resisting the notion that we were there at all. Which left her only Mrs. Broadhurst to deal with.

"Can I get you something, Mrs. Broadhurst? A nice cup of tea?"

"No thanks. Where's Fritz?"

"I believe he's in his room. The poor boy isn't feeling too well."

"He isn't a boy," Mrs. Broadhurst said.

His mother corrected her. "He is, emotionally. The doctor said he's emotionally immature."

She glanced quickly at Kelsey and me to see if we were picking this up. I sensed the beginning of a psychiatric copout.

"Get him out here," Mrs. Broadhurst said.

"But he isn't up to facing people now. He's terribly upset."

"What about?"

"The fire. He's always been afraid of fire." She gave Kelsey and me another seeking look. "Are you gentlemen from the police?"

"More or less," I said. "I'm a detective. Mr. Kelsey is investigating the fire for the Forest Service."

"I see." Her small body seemed to grow smaller and at the same time denser and heavier. "I don't know what kind of trouble Frederick is in, but I can assure you he isn't responsible."

"What kind of trouble is he in?" Kelsey said.

"I'm sure you know, or you wouldn't be here. I don't."

"Then how do you know that he's in trouble?"

"I've been looking after him for thirty-five years." Her look turned inward, as if she was registering each of the thirty-five years and each of her son's troubles.

Mrs. Broadhurst stood up. "We're wasting time. If you won't bring him out of his room, we'll go in and talk to him there. I want to know where my grandson is."

"Your grandson?" The little woman was appalled. "Has something happened to Ronald?"

"He's missing. And Stanley is dead. He was buried with my spade."

Mrs. Snow put her fingers to her mouth. A gold wedding band was sunk in the flesh of one finger like a scar.

"Buried in the garden?"

"No. At the top of the canyon."

"And you think Frederick did this?"

"I don't know."

I said: "We were hoping your son could help us."

"I see." Her face brightened surprisingly, like the lights just before a power failure. "Why don't I ask him? He isn't afraid of me—I can get more out of him."

Mrs. Broadhurst shook her head and started for the door that opened into the back of the house. Mrs. Snow danced out of her chair and intercepted her, backing into the doorway and talking quickly.

"Don't go into his room, please. It hasn't been cleaned, and Frederick isn't himself. He's in a bad state."

Mrs. Broadhurst spoke in a guttural voice: "So is Stanley. So are we all."

For the second or third time, she lost her balance and staggered a

little. Her mouth was pulled to one side in a half-grin which seemed to call attention to some secret joke. Mrs. Snow, who moved and changed like mercury, was at her side in a moment, taking her arm and helping her into an old platform rocker.

"You're feeling faint," she said. "And I don't wonder, if all these things are true. I'll get you a glass of water. Or would you like a cup of tea after all?"

She sounded genuinely concerned. But I suspected she was also a master of delaying tactics. She'd hold us off for a week if we played along with her.

I pushed through the door into the kitchen and called her son by name. A muffled answer came through a further door which opened off the kitchen. I knocked on it and looked in. The air in the room smelled sweet and rotten.

All I could see at first were the narrow shafts of sunlight that came through the holes in the blind drawn over the window. They were thrust across the room like the swords of a magician probing a basket to demonstrate that his partner had disappeared. As if he would like to disappear indeed, the gardener crouched in the corner of the iron bed with his feet pulled up under him.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Fritz."

"That's all right." His voice was hopeless.

I sat down on the foot of the bed facing him. "Did you take the spade and the pickax up the canyon?"

"Up the canyon?" he asked.

"To the Mountain House. Did you take them up there, Fritz?"

He considered his answer and finally said: "No."

"Do you know who did?"

"No." But his eyes shifted away from mine. He was a poor liar.

Moving as softly as a shadow, Kelsey appeared in the doorway. His large face was empty and waiting.

"The spade and pickax," I said to Fritz, "were used to bury Stanley Broadhurst this morning. If you know who took the spade and pickax, you probably know who killed Stanley."

He shook his head so hard that his face blurred. "He took them himself, when he came to get the key. He put them in the back of his convertible."

"Is that true, Fritz?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die." He crossed his breast with his finger.

"Why didn't you tell us before about the spade and the pickax?"

"He told me not to."

"Stanley Broadhurst told you not to?"

"Yessir." He nodded profoundly. "He gave me a dollar and made me promise not to."

"Did he say why?"

"He didn't have to. He's afraid of his mother. She doesn't like people messing with her garden tools."

"Did he tell you what he wanted the tools for?"

"He said that he was going to dig for arrowheads."

"Did you believe him?"

"Yessir."

"And then he drove up the mountain in his car?"

"Yessir."

"With the blond girl and the little boy?"

"Yessir."

"Did the girl say anything to you?"

"No sir. Not then."

"What do you mean, 'not then'? Did she talk to you some other time?"

"No sir. She never did."

But his eyes shifted away again. He peered at the swords of light thrust through the chinks in the blind as if they were in fact the probes of a rational universe finding him out.

"When did you see her again, Fritz?"

He was perfectly silent for a while. His eyes were the only living things in the room. His mother appeared in the doorway behind Kelsey.

"You have no right in there," she said to me. "You're violating his legal rights and nothing that he says can be used against him. In addition to which he's non compos, and I can prove it over and over with medical facts."

"You're assuming he's done something wrong, Mrs. Snow," I said.

"You mean he hasn't?"

"Not that I know of. Please go away and let me talk to him. He's a very important witness."

chapter 9

SHE GAVE HER son a sad dubious look, which he returned. But she backed away into the kitchen. Then I heard water running in a pan, and a gas burner blooping on.

"Did the girl come back, Fritz?"

He nodded.

"When was this?"

"Around noon, or a little later. I was eating my lunch."

"What did she say?"

"She said Ronny was hungry. I gave him a half of a peanut butter sandwich. I gave her the other half."

"Did she mention Stanley Broadhurst?"

"No. I didn't ask her. But she was scared."

"Did she say so?"

"She didn't have to say so. I can tell. The boy was scared, too. I can tell."

"What happened after that?"

"Nothing. She went away down the canyon."

"On foot?"

"Yeah." But his eyes were avoiding mine again.

"Are you sure she didn't take your car?"

His head sank lower. He sat perfectly still like a yogi studying the center of his body.

"All right. She took my car. They drove away in my car."

"Why didn't you tell us that before?"

"I never thought of it. I was fertilizing—I had a lot on my mind."

"Come off it, Fritz. The boy is gone and his father is dead."

"I didn't kill him!"

"I think I believe you. Not everybody will."

He lifted his head and looked past Kelsey. His mother was moving around in the kitchen. He listened to the sounds she made, as if they might tell him what to say and think.

"Forget about your mother, Fritz. This is between you and me."

"Close the door then. I don't want her to hear me. Or him either."

Kelsey stepped back out of the doorway and closed the door. I said to Fritz: "Did you let her take your car?"

"Yeah. She said Mr. Broadhurst wanted her to have it."

"There's more to it than that, Fritz, isn't there?"

Shame suffused his face. "Don't tell *her*." He waved a loose hand toward the kitchen.

"Don't tell her what?" I said.

"She let me touch her." The memory, or the fantasy, shuddered through him. His scarred mouth smiled, leaving his eyes still sad. "I mean, she looked like a girl I used to know."

"And you let her take your car."

"She said she'd bring it back. But," he added in a grieved tone, "she never did yet."

"Did she say where she was going?"

"No." He sat for a moment in a listening attitude. "I heard her drive down the canyon."

"And the boy was with her?"

"Yessir. She made him go along with her."

"Didn't he want to go?"

"No." He shook his head furiously, as if he were the boy himself. "But she made him."

"How did she make him?"

"She said the bogy man would get him. She picked him up and put him on the seat and drove away with him."

I got out my notebook and pen. "What kind of a car is it?"

"1953 Chevrolet sedan. She still runs good."

"What color?"

"It's partly the same old blue and partly red primer. I started to paint her, but I got too busy."

"License?"

"You better ask my mother. She keeps track of everything around here. But don't *tell* her." He touched his mouth.

I went out into the kitchen. Mrs. Snow was at the gas stove, pouring boiling water into a brown teapot. The steam had clouded her glasses, and she turned to me in blank apprehension like a blind woman taken by surprise.

"The girl took your son's car."

She set down the teakettle with a crash. "I *knew* he did something wrong."

"That's not the point, Mrs. Snow. If you can give me the license number we'll put out an alarm."

"What will they do to Frederick?"

"Nothing. *Can* you give me the license number?"

She rummaged in a kitchen drawer, found an old leatherette memorandum book, and read aloud from it: "IKT 447."

I wrote down the number. Then I returned to the front room and reported to Kelsey. Mrs. Broadhurst was slumped in the platform rocker. Her color was high and her eyes were partly closed.

"Has she been drinking?" I asked Kelsey.

"Not that I know of."

Mrs. Broadhurst sighed, and made an effort to get up. She fell back onto the platform rocker, which creaked under her weight.

Mrs. Snow backed through the doorway from the kitchen. She was balancing a tray which held the brown teapot, containers of milk and sugar, and a bone-china cup and saucer which looked as if they had been worn thin. She set the tray on a table beside the platform rocker, and filled the teacup from the pot. I could see the dark tea rising through the cup.

She spoke to Mrs. Broadhurst with forced cheerfulness: "A spot of tea is good for whatever ails you. It will clear your brain and pep you up. I know just how you like it, with milk and sugar — isn't that right?"

Mrs. Broadhurst said in a thick voice: "You're very kind."

She reached for the teacup. Her arm swung wide and loose, sweeping the teacup and the milk and sugar off the tray. Mrs. Snow got down on her knees and gathered the pieces of the broken cup as if it was a religious object. She darted into the kitchen for a towel and blotted up some of the tea from the threadbare carpet.

Kelsey had lifted Mrs. Broadhurst by the shoulders and kept her from falling out of the chair.

"Who's her doctor?" I asked Mrs. Snow.

"Dr. Jerome. Do you want me to look up the number for you?"

"You could call him yourself."

"What shall I say is the matter?"

"I don't know. It could be a heart attack. Maybe you better call an ambulance, too."

Mrs. Snow stood motionless for a second, as if all her responses had been used up. Then she went back into the kitchen. I heard her dialing.

I was getting restless. The missing boy was the main thing, and he

was long gone by now. I gave Kelsey the license number of the gardener's old car and suggested that he put out an all-points on it. He called the sheriff's office.

I went outside. Jean was pacing back and forth on the broken sidewalk. Her short skirt and her long white legs gave her a harlequin aspect, like a sad clown caught on a poor street under a smoky sky.

"What on earth is going on in there?"

I told her what the gardener had told me and added that her mother-in-law was ill.

"She's never been ill in her life."

"She is now. We're getting an ambulance for her." As I spoke, I could hear it coming in the distance like the memory of a scream.

"What am I going to do?" Jean said, as if the ambulance was coming for her.

"Go with Mrs. Broadhurst to the hospital."

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know yet."

"I'd rather go with you."

I didn't know exactly what she meant, and neither, I thought, did she. I gave her my business card and an all-purpose answer: "We'll keep in touch. Let my answering service know where you're staying."

She looked at the card as if it was in a foreign language. "You're quitting on me, aren't you?"

"No. I'm not."

"Do you want money, is that it?"

"It can wait."

"What do you want from me, then?"

"Nothing."

She looked at me as if she knew better. People always wanted something.

The ambulance turned the corner. Its animal scream sank to a growl before it stopped in the road.

"This the Snow residence?" the driver called.

I said it was. He and his partner took a stretcher into the house and came out with Mrs. Broadhurst on it. As they lifted her into the back of the ambulance, she tried to sit up.

"Who pushed me?"

"Nobody, dearie," the driver said. "We'll give you a sniff of oxygen and that'll perk you up."

Jean said without looking at me: "I'll follow along in her car. I can't let her go to the hospital by herself."

I decided it was time to deliver the green Mercedes to Mrs. Roger

Armistead. Kelsey pointed out Crescent Drive, on the first ridge overlooking the city. There was smoke above it, pre-empting most of the sky.

Kelsey turned to me, the flesh around his eyes still crinkled by the long look he had taken. "Be careful if you're going up that way. The fire is still on the move."

I said I would be careful. "Can I drop you anywhere?"

"No thanks. I can use the pickup to get downtown. But first I want to do some further checking on Fritz."

"Don't you believe him?"

"Up to a point I do. But you never get all the facts on the first go-round."

He went back toward the house. Mrs. Snow was standing framed in the doorway like a faded vestal virgin guarding a shrine.

chapter 10

On my way up to Crescent Drive I punched on the car radio. It was tuned to a local station which was broadcasting continuous fire reports. The Rattlesnake Fire, as the announcer called it, was threatening the northeastern side of the city. Hundreds of residents were being evacuated. Smoke-jumpers were being flown in and additional fire-fighting equipment was on its way. But unless the Santa Ana stopped blowing, the announcer said, Rattlesnake might strike across the city all the way to the sea.

The Armistead house, like the Broadhurst house, was in debatable territory. I parked in the courtyard beside a black Continental. The fire was so close that I could sense its fibrillation when the engine died. Ashes like scant gray snow were sifting down onto the blacktop in the courtyard. I could hear water gushing somewhere at the rear.

The house was white and one-storied, set like a classical temple against a grove of cypress trees. It was so nicely proportioned that I didn't realize how big it was until I hiked around it to the back. I passed a fifty-foot swimming pool at the bottom of which lay a blue mink coat, like the headless pelt of a woman, anchored by what looked like jewel boxes.

A tanned woman with short gray hair was spraying the cypresses with a hose. Beyond the cypresses, in the dry brush, a dark-haired man in dungarees was digging a furrow and beating out falling embers with his spade.

The woman was talking to the fire as if it was a crazy man or a wild dog. "Get back, you crummy bastard!"—and she turned to me almost gaily when I called her name.

"Mrs. Armistead?"

I saw when she turned that her gray hair was premature. Her face was

a hot brown, cooled by slanting green eyes. Her body was elegant in a white slack-suit.

"Who are you?"

"Archer. I brought your Mercedes."

"Good. I'll send you a check, provided the car's in good shape."

"It is, and I'll send you a bill."

"In that case you might as well help out here." Her downward smile made a white gash in her face. She gestured toward a spade which lay on brown cypress needles under the trees. "You could help Carlos dig that ditch."

It sounded like a poor idea. I was in city clothes. But I peeled off my jacket and picked up the spade and went through the trees to help Carlos.

He was a sawed-off middle-aged Chicano who took my arrival as a matter of course. I worked behind him, broadening and deepening his furrow. It was almost certainly hopeless, a token scratch in the dirt across the base of the chaparral-covered hill. I could hear the fire very plainly now, breathing on the far side of the hill. Behind me the wind was soughing in the cypresses.

"Where's Mr. Armistead?" I said to Carlos.

"I guess he moved onto the boat."

"Where would that be?"

"In the marina."

He gestured toward the sea. After a few more spadefuls, he added: "Her name is Ariadne." He pronounced the name slowly and carefully.

"The girl?"

"The boat," he said. "Mrs. Armistead told me it's a Greek name. She's crazy about Greece."

"She looks a little like a Greek."

"Yeah, I guess she does," he said with a ruminative smile.

The sound of the fire became louder, and his face changed. We spaded some more. I was beginning to feel the work in my shoulders and in the palms of my hands. My shirt was pasted to my back.

"Is Mr. Armistead all by himself on the boat?"

"No. He's got a boy with him. He calls him a crew, but I never seen him do any work on the boat. He's one of these long-hairs, they call 'em." Carlos raised his grimy hand to his head and caressed imaginary locks.

"Doesn't Mr. Armistead like girls?"

"Yeah, he likes girls." He added thoughtfully: "There was a girl on the boat the other night."

"Blond girl?"

"Yeah."

"Did you see her?"

"My friend Pedro saw her when he was going out of the harbor yesterday morning. Pedro's a fisherman—he gets up before the daylight. The girl was 'way up the mast and yelling like she was going to jump. The boy was trying to talk her down."

"What did Pedro do?"

Carlos shrugged. "Pedro, he's got children to feed. He don't have time to stop and fool around with crazy girls."

Carlos went back to his work with renewed concentration, as if he was digging a foxhole that would shelter him against the contemporary world. I worked along behind him. But it was clear that we were wasting our time.

The fire appeared at the top of the hill like a brilliant omniform growth which continued to grow until it bloomed very large against the sky. A sentinel quail on the hillside below it was ticking an alarm.

Carlos looked up at the fire and crossed himself. Then he turned his back on it and beckoned to me and walked away from his furrow through the trees.

One of the cypresses was beginning to smoke, high beyond the reach of Mrs. Armistead's hose. She told Carlos to climb the tree.

He shook his head. "It wouldn't do no good. The trees are gonna go, and maybe the house, too."

The fire was coming down the hill, gathering speed and size. The trees had begun to sway. From the undergrowth beneath them, a bevy of stubby-winged quail flew up fighting for altitude over the house. Smoke like billowing darkness followed them.

Mrs. Armistead went on spraying the trees with her ineffectual hose. Carlos moved past her to the faucet and turned it off. She stood with the dripping nozzle in her hand, facing the fire.

It made a noise like a storm. Enormous and hot and wild, it leapt clumsily into the trees. The cypress that had been smoking burst into flames. Then the other trees blazed up like giant torches in a row.

I took Mrs. Armistead by the hand and pulled her away. She resisted jerkily, instinctively, like a woman who had trouble taking direction. She held onto the hose as long as she could, and finally dropped it in the grass.

Carlos was waiting impatiently by the pool. Fire was falling around him, sputtering and turning black in the blue water.

"We better get out of here," he said. "We might could be cut off if she jumps the driveway. What do you want me to do about the fur coat?"

"Leave it in the pool," she said. "It's too hot for mink."

I didn't exactly like the woman, but I was beginning to take her personally. I gave Carlos the key to the Mercedes and went with her to the Lincoln Continental.

"You can drive if you like," she said. "I'm a little done in."

She grimaced. The admission cost her pain. As we followed the Mercedes down the driveway, she added a kind of explanation: "I love those quail. I've been feeding them and watching them ever since we built the house. They were finally beginning to feel safe. They brought their chicks right into the yard this spring."

"The quail will come back."

"Maybe so. I wonder if I will."

We came to a turnaround which overlooked the city. Carlos pulled the Mercedes off the road, and I followed him. Smoke hung over the city, giving it a sepia tint like an old photograph. We climbed out of the cars and looked back at the house.

The fire bent around it like the fingers of a hand, squeezing smoke out of the windows and then flame. We got back into our cars and turned downhill. It was my second evacuation of the day, and it made me feel slightly paranoid until I thought of the reason. The people I was getting involved with could afford to live in the open outside the city, right up against nature.

There was only one good thing about the fire. It made people talk about the things that really concerned them. I asked Mrs. Armistead how long she had lived in the house.

"Just four years. Roger and I came up here from Newport and built it. It was part of an attempt to hold our marriage together, on the analogy of having a child."

"Do you have any children?"

"Only each other," she answered in a wry voice. Then she added: "I wish I had a daughter. I wish even more that my husband had a daughter."

"On account of the blond girl?"

She turned toward me suddenly, with a kind of suppressed violence. "Just what do you know about the girl?"

"Very little. I've only seen her once, at a distance."

"I've never seen her at all," the woman said. "She sounds like a kook. But it's hard to tell about young people nowadays."

"It always was."

She was still watching my face. "You said that you're a detective. Just what has the girl done?"

"I'm trying to find out."

"But you didn't just pick her at random. She must have done something wrong, besides taking the Mercedes. What did she do?"

"Ask Roger."

"I intend to. But you haven't explained why *you're* so interested in her."

"She ran away with a six-year-old boy. It amounts to child stealing." I held back the rest of the story.

"Why would she do a thing like that?" When I failed to answer that question, she asked another: "Is she on acid or some other drug?"

"She may be."

"I thought so." She spoke with a kind of bitter satisfaction. "She went off the deep end the night before last, literally. She ended up jumping into the harbor. Jerry had to go in after her."

"Who's Jerry?"

"The boy who lives on the boat. Roger calls him his crew, for want of a better word."

"What do you call him?"

"His last name is Kilpatrick."

I remembered the book in my pocket, with "Jerry Kilpatrick" inscribed on the flyleaf in pencil. "Do you know who he is?"

"He's the son of Brian Kilpatrick, a real estate man in town. As a matter of fact Mr. Kilpatrick sold us that piece of property on the ridge."

"Is that how your husband met Jerry?"

"I think so. You could ask Roger."

"When will we be seeing Roger?"

"Quite soon, if he's at the beach house."

We were passing through the center of the city. The main street was clogged with traffic, and the sidewalks were crowded. It was strange to see the people going about their business without apparent concern for the fire at the edges of the town. The people were moving more quickly than usual, perhaps, as if their lives had speeded up and might come to an end suddenly.

Following Carlos in the Mercedes, I turned onto Maritime Drive, which took us along the ocean to a row of beach houses curving around a bay. Carlos led me into a parking lot behind the houses, and I drew up beside the Mercedes. "While I'm thinking about it," Mrs. Armistead said, "I'll pay you now. How much?"

"A hundred will do it."

She produced a money clip made of gold in the shape of a dollar-sign and laid a hundred-dollar bill across my upper leg. Then she put a fifty on top of it.

"That's a tip," she said.

I took the money, since I needed it for expenses, but I felt vaguely declassed by the transaction, like a repossession man. It gave me a certain sympathy for Roger, even before I met him.

The Armisteads' beach house was a driftwood-gray building which we entered at the rear on the second-floor level. We moved past an open stairwell into the main room. It was furnished nautically, with brass, a wall barometer, captain's chairs.

Through the sliding glass windows at the front I could see a youngish man sitting on the balcony. He was sportily clad in a blue T-shirt and a boating cap, but he was watching the people on the beach from a distance, like a spectator sitting in a theatre box.

"Hello, Roger." The woman's voice had changed. It was soft and musical, as if she was listening to it, tuning it carefully.

The young man got up and took off his cap, showing neither surprise nor pleasure. "I didn't expect a visit from you, Fran."

"The house on Crescent Drive just burned to the ground."

His face lengthened. "With all my clothes?"

"You can always buy more clothes." Her voice was partly serious and partly mocking, waiting for him to decide which way he wanted the meeting to go.

He said a little belatedly: "Too bad about the house. You liked it, didn't you?"

"I liked it as long as you liked it."

"Are you planning to build again?"

"I don't know, Roger. What do you think?"

He moved his heavy shoulders, shrugging off the threat of responsibility. "It's really up to you, isn't it?"

"Well, I feel like traveling." She spoke with a kind of fake decisiveness, like a woman improvising. "I may go to Yugoslavia."

He turned and stared at me, as if he'd just discovered my presence. He was a good-looking man, perhaps ten years younger than his wife, with a strong impatient body. I noticed that his dark hair was thinning. He noticed that I noticed and ruffled it up with his hand.

"This is Mr. Archer," his wife said. "He's a detective. He's looking for the girl you had aboard the sloop."

"What girl?" But he looked at me with instant dislike and flushed.

"The one who tried to fly too near the sun. Or was it the moon?"

"I wouldn't know. I had nothing to do with her."

"Do you know her full name?" I said.

"Susan, I think. Sue Crandall."

His wife brightened up alarmingly. "I thought you said you had nothing to do with her."

"I didn't. I chewed Jerry out for having her aboard, and he told me what her name was. I had to force it out of him."

"The story came to me differently," she said. "I heard she spent Thursday night on *Ariadne* with you. The marina's rather a public place for that sort of thing, isn't it?"

He answered somberly: "I don't mess with young chicks. I spent Thursday night here by myself, drinking. The girl was taken aboard without my knowledge and without my permission."

"Where's she from?" I said.

"I don't really know. Somewhere down south, according to Jerry—"

His wife cut in: "How long have you known her?"

He gave her a hard dull look. "Don't be a broken record, Fran. I never met the Crandall girl. Ask Jerry Kilpatrick if you don't believe me. The girl is his little friend."

"Who gave her the use of the Mercedes, if you didn't?"

"That was Jerry's doing, too. I hate to blame it all on him, but that's the truth. I chewed him out for it."

"I don't believe you. You're not going to have the Mercedes from now on."

"To hell with you then."

He moved past her to the open stairs and stamped down to the ground floor. There were sounds like drawers being opened and shut, and closet doors being slammed.

The house was frame, with open rafters and without insulation, so that the angry sounds reverberated through it. Fran Armistead winced at them, as if the violence was being inflicted on her body. She was afraid of her husband, I thought, and probably in love with him.

She went down after him, looking strained and intent, like a woman descending voluntarily into hell. Their voices floated up the stairs, clearly audible in the intervals between the sounds of the surf.

"Don't be angry," she said.

"I'm not angry."

"You can have the Mercedes."

"I need some transportation," he said reasonably. "Not that I'm going anywhere."

"No. You stay with me. I felt absolutely ghastly when the house burned. I felt as if my life was burning down. But it wasn't, was it?"

"I don't know. What's this about going to Yugoslavia?"

"Don't you want to go?"

"What's in Yugoslavia?"

"We'll stay here then. Does that suit you?"

"For the present," he said. "I may have had it with this town."

"On account of the girl? What's her name—Susan?"

"Listen. Do we have to go on about her? I never even saw her."

A door closed, and their voices became muffled. I began to hear more private sounds, and decided to go outside.

It was late on a Saturday afternoon, and the beach was littered with bodies. It was like a warning vision of the future, when every square foot of the world would be populated. I found a place to sit in the sand beside a youth with a guitar who lay propped against a girl's stomach. I could smell her sun-tan oil, and I felt as if everybody but me was paired off like the animals in the ark.

I got up and looked around me. Under the stratum of smoke which lay over the city, the air was harshly clear. The low sun was like a spinning yellow frisbee which I could almost reach out and catch.

The thrusting masts of the marina looked dark and calcined against the light in the west. I took off my shoes and socks and carried them along the beach in that direction.

chapter 11

A CONCRETE BREAKWATER extended by a sandbar curved like a sheltering arm around the harbor and marina. A few boats, under motor or sail, were coming in from the sea through the marked channel. A multitude of other boats lay in the slips, from racing yachts to superannuated landing craft.

I walked along beside the high woven-wire fence which divided the marina from the public parking lot. There were several gates in it but they all had automatic locks. I found a boat rental dock near the foot of the breakwater and asked the man in charge how to get to *Ariadne.*

He gave me a suspicious look which took in my bare feet and the shoes I had tied together and slung over my shoulder.

"Mr. Armistead's not aboard, if he's the one you're looking for."

"What about Jerry Kilpatrick?"

"I wouldn't know about him. Go down to the third gate and try giving him a yell. You can see the boat from there, about halfway along the float on the left."

I put on my shoes and found the gate and the boat. She was a white sloop, poised on the quiet water in a way that made my breath come a little faster. A thin young man with straggling hair and a furred lower face was working over the auxiliary motor near her stern. I called to him through the locked gate.

"Jerry?"

His head came up. I waved him toward me. He jumped down onto the slip and moved along it in a swift barefoot shamble. He was naked to the waist, and he walked with his bearded head thrust forward as though to cancel out his boy's shoulders and his narrow hairless chest. His hands were so fouled with engine oil that he seemed to be wearing black gloves.

He regarded me somberly through the wire gate. "What can I do for you?"

"You lost your book." I got out the copy of *Green Mansions* with his name on the flyleaf. "This is yours, isn't it?"

"Let me see." He started to open the gate, then clicked it emphatically shut again. "If my father sent you, he can drop dead. And you can go back and tell him that I said that."

"I don't know your father."

"Neither do I know him. I never knew him. And I don't want to know him."

"That takes care of your father. What about me?"

"That's your problem."

"Don't you want your book?"

"Keep it, if you can read. It'll improve your mind, if you have a mind."

He was a very hostile young man. I reminded myself that he was a witness, and there was no point in getting angry with him through a fence.

"I can always get somebody to read it to me," I said.

He smiled quickly. The smile in the midst of his reddish beard seemed extraordinarily bright.

I said:

"There's a small boy missing. His father was killed this morning—"

"You think I killed him?"

"Did you?"

"I don't believe in violence." His look implied that I did.

"Then you'll want to help me find whoever killed him. Why don't you let me in? Or come out and we can talk."

"I like it this way." He fingered the wire gate. "You look like the violent type to me."

"The situation isn't funny," I said. "The missing boy is six years old. His name is Ronald Broadhurst. Do you know anything about him?"

He shook his tangled head. The beard that covered his lower face seemed to have overgrown his mouth and left him only his eyes to speak with. They were brown, and slightly starred, like damaged glass.

"A girl was with him," I went on. "She was reading this book of yours last night in bed. Her name is Sue Crandall."

"I don't know her."

"I've been told you do. She was here night before last."

"I wouldn't know about that."

"I think you would. You lent her this book, and you lent her Armistead's Mercedes. What else did you lend her?"

"I don't understand what you mean."

"She got stoned on something and climbed the mast. What did you give her, Jerry?"

A shadow of fear crossed his face. He converted it into anger. His brown eyes became reddish and hot, as if there was fire behind them. "I thought you were fuzz," he said in a stylized way. "Why don't you go away?"

"I want to talk to you seriously. You're in trouble."

"Go to hell."

He trotted away along the slip. His hairy head seemed enormous and grotesque on his boy's body, like a papiermâché saint's head on a stick. I stood and watched him vault into the cockpit of the boat and go back to work on the motor.

The sun was almost down now. When it reached the water, the entire sea and sky seemed to ignite, burning red in a larger fire than Rattlesnake.

Before it got dark I went through the parking lot looking for Fritz Snow's old Chevrolet sedan. I couldn't find it, but I had a persistent feeling that it had to be in the neighborhood. I began to search along the boulevard which paralleled the shore.

The western sky lost its color like a face going suddenly pale. The light faded gradually from the air. It clung for a long time to the surface of the water, which stretched out like a faint and fallen sky.

I walked for several blocks without finding the old Chevrolet. Street lights came on, and the waterfront was bleakly lit by the neon signs of motels and hamburger joints. I crossed to one of the latter and had a double hamburger with a paper sack of French fried potatoes, and coffee. I ate and drank like a starved man, and remembered that I hadn't eaten since morning.

When I turned away from the bright counter, it was almost fully dark. I glanced up at the mountains, and was shocked by what I saw. The fire had grown and spread as if it fed on darkness. It hung around the city like the bivouacs of a besieging army.

I took up my search for the Chevrolet again, working through the motel parking lots and up the side streets toward the railroad tracks. As soon as I left the boulevard, I was in a ghetto. Black and brown children were playing quiet games in the near-darkness. From the broken-down porches of the little houses, their mothers and grandmothers watched them and me.

I found Fritz Snow's half-painted Chevrolet in a rutted lane behind a dusty oleander hedge. There was music leaking out of it. A small man in a baseball cap was sitting behind the wheel.

"What are you doing, friend?"

"Playing my organ." He put a mouth organ to his lips again and

played a few bars of wheezy blue music. I'm guilty, it seemed to say, but I've suffered enough—so have you.

"You play very well."

"It's a gift."

He pointed skyward through the roof of the car. Then he blew a few more bars, and shook the spit out of his mouth organ. He smelled of wine.

"Is this your car?" I asked him.

"I'm watching it for a friend."

I got in beside him. The key was in the ignition, and I took it. He gave me a glinting apprehensive look.

"My name is Archer. What's your name?"

"Amos Johnstone. You got no right or reason to bust me. I'm really and truly watching it for a friend."

"I'm not a cop. Is your friend a young woman with a little boy?"

"That's her. She gave me a dollar—told me to sit in the car till she came back."

"How long ago was that?"

"I dunno, I don't carry a watch. Only thing I can swear to, it was today."

"Before dark?"

He peered at the sky as if nightfall had taken him by surprise. "Must have been. I bought some wine with the dollar, and it's gone." He glanced around at me. "I could use another dollar."

"Maybe we'll get to that. Where did the young lady go?"

"Down the street." He gestured in the direction of the marina.

"And she took the boy with her?"

"Yessir."

"Was he all right?"

"He was scared."

"Did he say anything?"

"He didn't say a word to me. But he was shivering like a puppy."

I gave the man a dollar and started back to the marina. He played me some farewell music which merged with the voices of the children playing in the dark.

There were a few scattered lights on the boats along the slips. A steadier, more brilliant light shone over the wire gate from the top of a metal pole. I took a quick look around and went over the gate, snagging one leg on the barbed wire across the top of it and coming down hard on my back on the slanting gangway. It shook me, and I stayed down for a minute.

My blood was beating in my ears and eyes as I approached the sloop. There was a light in the cabin, but no one on deck that I could see. In

spite of the circumstances, there was something secret and sweet about the dark water, and something beautiful about the boat, like a corralled horse at night. I climbed over the railing into the cockpit. The mast towered up against the obscure sky.

There was a scuffling noise in the cabin. "Who's that?" It was Jerry's voice. He opened the hatchway and stuck out his head. His eyes were wide and glaring, and his open mouth was like a dark hole in his beard. He looked like Lazarus coming out of the tomb.

I reached for him, got hold of his body under the arms, lifted him up, and set him down hard in the cockpit on his back. He stayed down, as if he had hit his head. I felt a twinge of shame at hurting a boy.

I went down the ladder into the cabin, past a ship-to-shore radio and a chart table. On one of the two lower bunks a girl-shaped body was lying under a red blanket with only its blond hair showing, spilling like twisted gold across the pillow.

I pulled the blanket off her face. Her expression was queerly impassive. Her eyes looked at me from some other place, almost as if she was ready to die or perhaps already had.

Something besides her body was moving under the blanket. I stripped it off. She was holding the small boy against her, with one arm curled around his head and her hand over his mouth. He lay still beside her. Even his round blue eyes were perfectly still.

They flickered past me. I turned in the cramped space. Jerry was crouched on the ladder with a revolver held in both his hands.

"Get off this boat, you grungy pig."

"Put the gun away. You'll hurt somebody."

"You," he said. "Unless you get off here now. I'm in charge of this boat, and you're trespassing."

It was hard to take him seriously, but the gun helped. He waved it at me, and moved to one side. I climbed out past him, undecided whether I should try to take him or pass.

My indecision made me slow. Out of the corner of my eye I saw him shift the gun in his hands and swing it up by the barrel. I failed to avoid its fall. The scene spun away.

chapter 12

I WAS WATCHING the cogwheels of the universe turning. It resembled, on a large scale, one of those boxes of gears that engineers fool around with in their spare time. I seemed to be able to see the whole apparatus at once, and to understand that the ratio of output to input was one to one.

Quiet water lapped at the edge of my attention. The side of my face was against a flat rough surface which seemed to rise and fall. The air seemed cooler, and I thought for a while that I was on the boat. Then I got up onto my hands and knees and saw that I was on the slip and that the space where *Ariadne* had lain was an oblong of dark water.

I dipped up some of the water in my hand and splashed it on my face. I was dizzy and depressed. I hadn't taken the bearded boy seriously enough, and mishandled both him and the situation. I checked my wallet: the money was still in it.

I made my way up the gangway to a public rest station in the parking lot. I washed my face again, without looking too closely at it, and decided not to mess with the swelling on my head, which had stopped bleeding.

I found a pay phone, with a directory chained to it, on the outside wall of the building and called the sheriff's office. The deputy on duty told me that the sheriff and most of his officers were in the fire zone. He was swamped with calls and had no one to send out.

I dialed the local Forest Service number. The female voice of an answering service informed me that no calls were taken after business hours, but she agreed to accept a message for Kelsey. I dictated a telegraphic version of recent events and listened to the operator read it back to me in a bored voice.

Next I looked up Brian Kilpatrick in the Real Estate section of the

yellow pages. Both home and business numbers were listed for him. I called Kilpatrick's home, got him immediately, and asked him if I could come and see him. He sighed.

"I just sat down with a drink. What's on your mind?"

"Your son Jerry."

"I see. Are you an officer?" His carefully modulated voice had flattened out.

"A private detective."

"Does this have to do with the trouble at the harbor yesterday morning?"

"I'm afraid it does, and it's getting worse. May I come and talk to you?"

"You still haven't said what about. Is a girl involved in this?"

"Yes. She's a young blond named Susan Crandall. Susan and your son and a little boy named Ron Broadhurst have taken off—"

"Is that Mrs. Broadhurst's grandson?"

"Yes, it is."

"Where in the name of heaven have they gone?"

"To sea. They took the Armistead yacht."

"Does Roger Armistead know about this?"

"Not yet. I called you first."

"Thank you," he said. "You'd better come over as you suggest. Do you know where I live?" He gave me the address, twice.

I called a cab and repeated the address to the driver. He was one of the loquacious ones. He talked about fires and floods, earthquakes and oil spills. Why, he wanted to know, would anyone want to live in California? If things got any worse, he was going to move his family back to Motown. That was a city.

He took me to an upper-middle residential area on the side of the city which was not yet threatened by the fire. Kilpatrick's modern ranch house lay on a floodlit pad on the side of a brush-covered slope. I had left the cool air lower in the city, and hot wind blew in my face when I got out of the cab. I told the driver to wait.

Kilpatrick came out to meet me. He was a big man wearing an open-necked sport shirt over slacks. There was graying red hair on both his head and his chest. In spite of the drink in his hand, and the dead-fish gleam of previous drinks in his eyes, his large handsome face was sober, almost lugubrious.

He offered me his hand, and peered at my injured head. "What happened to you?"

"Your son Jerry happened to me. He hit me with a gun-butt."

Kilpatrick made a commiserating face. "I want to say right now I'm

heartily sorry. But," he added, "I'm not responsible for what Jerry does. He's gotten beyond my control."

"So I gather. Can we go inside?"

"By all means. You'll be wanting a drink."

He ushered me into a bar and game room which overlooked a brilliantly lighted pool. Beside the pool a woman with black hair and gleaming copper-colored legs was sitting in a long chair which concealed the rest of her. A portable radio on a table beside her was talking to her like a familiar spirit. A silver cocktail shaker stood by the radio.

Kilpatrick closed the venetian blinds before he turned up the light. He said that he was drinking martinis, and I asked for scotch and water, which he poured. We sat facing each other across a round table which had a chessboard made of light and dark squares of wood inlaid in its center.

He said in a cautious measured voice: "I suppose I better tell you that I heard from the girl's father earlier today. He found my son's name in his daughter's address book."

"How long has the girl been missing from home? Did Crandall say?"

Kilpatrick nodded. "A couple of days. She walked out on her parents Thursday."

"Did Crandall say why?"

"He doesn't know why, any more than I do." He added in a discouraged voice which made him sound like an old man: "We're losing a whole generation. They're punishing us for bringing them into the world."

"Do the Crandalls live in town here?"

"No."

"How do your son and their daughter happen to know each other?"

"I have no idea. All I know is what Crandall told me."

"What's Crandall's full name and where does he live?"

Kilpatrick lifted his palm in a traffic-halting gesture. "Before I tell you anything more, you'd better fill me in on the ramifications. How does the Broadhurst boy come into this? What are they planning to do with him?"

"There may not be any plan at all. It looks as if they're playing it by ear. But on the other hand it may be a kidnaping. It is now, in the legal sense."

"For money? Jerry claims that he despises money."

"Money isn't the only motive for kidnaping."

"What else is there?" Kilpatrick said.

"Revenge. Power. Kicks."

"That doesn't sound like Jerry."

"What about the girl?"

"I gather she's a fairly nice girl from a fairly nice family. Maybe not a happy girl, her father said, but a girl you can depend on."

"That's what Lizzie Borden's father used to say about her."

Kilpatrick gave me a shocked look. "It's a pretty farfetched comparison, isn't it?"

"I hope so. The man she was traveling with today—the little boy's father—was killed with a pickax."

Kilpatrick's face grew pale, setting its broken veins in relief. He finished his martini, and sucked audibly at the dry glass.

"Are you telling me Stanley Broadhurst has been killed?"

"Yes."

"You think she murdered him?"

"I don't know. But if she did, the Broadhurst boy is probably a witness."

"Was Jerry there?"

"I don't know."

"Where did this murder take place?"

"At the head of Mrs. Broadhurst's canyon, near a cabin called Mountain House. Apparently the fire was started at the same time."

Kilpatrick began to drum on the table with his glass. He got up and went to the bar, searching along the shelves of bottles behind it for something guaranteed to relieve anxiety. He came back to the table empty-handed, and soberer than ever.

"You should have told me about this when you called me in the first place. I never would have—" His voice broke off, and he glared at me distrustfully.

"You never would have let me in or talked to me," I said. "Where does Crandall live?"

"I'm not saying."

"You might as well. None of this will be a secret for long. The only positive thing we can do is try and head off Jerry and the girl before they make more trouble."

"What more could they do?"

"Lose the boy," I said. "Or kill him."

He looked at me narrow-eyed. "Just what's your interest in the boy?"

"Mrs. Stanley Broadhurst hired me to get him back."

"So you're on the other side."

"The boy's side."

"Do you know him?"

"Slightly."

"And you care about him personally?"

"Yes, I do."

"Then you have some faint idea of how I feel about my son."

"I'd have a better idea if you'd cooperate fully. I'm trying to head off trouble for you and your son."

"You smell like trouble to me," he said.

That stopped me for a minute. He had a salesman's insight into human weakness, and he'd touched on a fact which I didn't always admit to myself—that I sometimes served as a catalyst for trouble, not unwillingly.

With some idea of changing the subject a little, I brought out the green-covered book with his son's name penciled on the flyleaf.

"How did Sue Crandall get hold of this?"

After some thought, he said: "I suppose Jerry took it when he left. I don't pay too much attention to the books. My wife was the intellectual in the family. She graduated from Stanford."

"Is Mrs. Kilpatrick at home?"

He shook his head. "Ellen left me years ago. The girl out by the pool is my fiancée."

"How long ago did Jerry leave?"

"A couple of months. He moved onto the yacht in June. But actually he left me a year ago, as far as any real relationship is concerned. That was when he went away to college."

"He's in college?"

"Not any more," Kilpatrick said in a disappointed voice. "He could have handled it easily. I was all set to send him right through to a master's in business administration. But he refused to make the effort. Don't ask me why, because I don't know the answer." He reached across the table for the book and closed it on his son's name.

"Is Jerry on drugs?"

"I wouldn't know about that."

But his eyes were dubious and avoided mine. The conversation was running down, and it wasn't hard to guess why. He was afraid of involving his son in murder.

"You knew about the incident on the yacht," I said. "When the girl jumped overboard."

"That's right. I got the word from the harbor people. But I didn't know that drugs were involved."

Kilpatrick leaned toward me abruptly and took hold of my untouched scotch and water. "If you're not going to use that, I am," he said, and drank it down.

We sat in opposing silences. He was studying the inlaid board as if there were chessmen on it, most of them mine. Finally he looked up and met my eyes.

"You think she got drugs from Jerry, don't you?" he said.

"You're the authority on Jerry."

"No more," he said. "But I suspected he was using drugs. It was one of the bones of contention between us."

"What kind of drugs?"

"I don't really know. But he talked and acted as if he had blown his mind." The phrase was strange on his lips, and somehow touching, like a statement of fellow-feeling with his lost son. He added nervously: "I've told you more than I should have."

"You might as well tell me the rest of it."

"There is no rest of it. That's all there is. I had a bright promising boy and one day he decided to change all that and go and live like a waterfront bum."

"What's his in with Roger Armistead?"

"I sold some property to Armistead, and Armistead's always liked him. He taught him to sail. Last year Jerry crewed for him in the Ensenada race."

"Jerry must be a pretty good sailor."

"He is. He could sail that sloop to Hawaii if he had to." His mood swung down: "Unless he's forgotten his navigation along with everything else."

He rose and went to the blinded window, separating the slats with his fingers and peering out, like a man in a building under attack.

"Dammit," he said. "I was supposed to take my fiancée to dinner." He turned on me in quick anger. "I suppose you realize you're wrecking my evening?"

The question didn't deserve an answer, and he knew it. He drifted to the bar as if he might find a ghostly bartender to complain to. There was a telephone on the bar, with a little blue book beside it. He opened the book as if to look up a number, then dropped it again. Instead he got out a fresh glass and poured a scotch and water and rapped it down in front of me.

I thanked him for the gesture, though I didn't need the drink. I could feel a long night coming on. So could Kilpatrick. He stood above me leaning on the table, his hands splayed out, his face expanding with emotion.

"Look," he said. "I'm not the swinging bastard I—you think I am. When Jerry was just a tot my wife ran out on me. I never gave her any good reason to leave me, except that I couldn't provide the life romantic. But Jerry blamed me for the breakup. He's always blamed me for everything." He drew in a deep mournful breath. "I really do care about him. I wanted the best for him, and knocked myself out to provide it. But things don't work out like that any more, do they? No more happy endings."

He leaned above me, listening to the silence as if he was hearing it for the first time. I said:

"What can we do to get him and Susan back?"

"I don't know."

"I thought of calling the FBI."

"Don't do that. It would be the end of Jerry."

I felt his heavy hand on my shoulder. He removed it and went to the bar again, moving like a caged animal that had paced out the short distance many times. He poured himself a scotch and resumed his place at the round table.

"Give him a chance to bring the sloop back on his own. We don't have to make a federal case out of it."

"We're going to have to tell the local police."

"Let me do that," he said. "I'll talk to Sheriff Tremaine—he's a friend of mine."

"Tonight?"

"Of course tonight. I'm more concerned than you are. Jerry's my son. What happens to him happens to me." He sounded as if he wanted to mean it, but couldn't quite feel the full sense of the words.

"Then tell me where I can reach Sue Crandall's parents. I particularly want to talk to her father."

"I'm sorry. I wouldn't feel right about it."

I hit him with the hardest words I could think of: "You may never feel right about anything again. The situation is going to hell in a handcar, and you won't lift a finger to stop it. Still you expect some kind of happy ending."

"I don't expect one. I said that." He wiped his eyes and cheeks with a downward motion of his palms, which stayed pressed together at his chin in a prayerful attitude. "You've got to give me time to think this through."

"Sure. Take several hours. I'll sit here and wonder what's happening to the Broadhurst boy."

Kilpatrick gave me a grave look across his peaked fingers. I caught a glimpse of the broken seriousness which lived in him like a spoiled priest in hiding.

The doorbell chimed, and he left the room, closing the door behind him. I picked up the small blue book beside the phone. It contained a handwritten list of numbers. A Lester Crandall was listed among the C's, with a Pacific Palisades number. The listing probably wasn't new—there were other names below it on the page.

As I was making a note of it, the door was flung open behind me. It was the dark-haired woman from the poolside. She was a handsome woman, but a little old for the bikini she was wearing. And she was smashed.

"Where's the action?" she said boisterously.

"There is none."

The corners of her mouth drooped like a disappointed child's. "Brian promised to take me dancing."

She did a few experimental steps, and almost fell down. I led her to one of the chairs, but she didn't want to sit still. She wanted to dance.

Kilpatrick came into the room. He gave no sign of noticing the woman. Moving like something mechanical and pre-aimed, he went behind the bar and opened a drawer and took out a heavy revolver.

"What goes on?" I asked him.

He gave no answer, but I didn't like the look of inert cold anger on his face. I followed him out to the front of the house, letting him know I was there. A rather wild-eyed young man with soot on his forehead was waiting at the front door.

Kilpatrick showed him the gun. "Get out of here. I don't have to put up with this kind of nonsense."

"You call it nonsense, do you?" the young man said. "I lost my house and my furniture. My family's clothes. Everything. And I'm holding you responsible, Mr. Kilpatrick."

"How am I responsible?"

"I talked to a fireman after my house burned down — too bad he wasn't there when it burned, but he wasn't — and he said that canyon should never have been built in, with the high fire hazard. You never even mentioned that when you sold it to me."

"It's a risk we all run," Kilpatrick said. "I could be burned out tonight or tomorrow myself."

"I hope you are. I hope your house burns down."

"Is that what you came here to tell me?"

"Not exactly." The young man sounded a little ashamed. "But I've got no place to spend the night."

"You're not going to spend it here."

"No. I realize that."

He ran out of words. With a parting look at the gun in Kilpatrick's hand, he walked quickly to a station wagon which was parked beside my taxicab. A number of children peered out through the back windows of the wagon, like prisoners wondering where they might be taken next. A woman sat in the front seat, looking straight ahead.

I said to Kilpatrick: "I'm glad you didn't shoot him."

"I had no intention of shooting him. But you should have heard the names he was calling me. I don't have to take—"

I cut in: "What area did he live in?"

"Canyon Estates. I'm the developer."

"Did the canyon go?"

"Not all of it. But several houses burned, including his." Kilpatrick jerked his angry head toward the departing station wagon. "He isn't the only one who took a beating. I'm still paying interest on some of those houses, and I'll never be able to move them now."

"Do you know what happened to Elizabeth Broadhurst's house?"

"The last I heard it was still standing. Those old Spanish-type structures were built to resist fire."

The dark-haired woman came up behind Kilpatrick. She had put on a light coat over her bikini and she looked quite sober, but sick.

"For heaven's sake," she said to him, "put that gun away. It scares the living hell out of me when you wave that gun around."

"I'm not waving it around." But he shoved it down out of sight in his pocket.

The three of us stepped out onto the asphalt pad. The cabdriver was watching us like an observer from Mars.

Kilpatrick wet his finger in his mouth and held it up. A cool wind was blowing up the canyon.

"That's sea air," he said. "If it keeps blowing from that direction we're going to be A-O.K."

I hoped he was right. But the eastern edges of the sky were still burning like curtains.

chapter 13

IT COST ME fifty dollars, paid in advance, to be driven to Northridge, where I'd left my car in Stanley Broadhurst's garage. The driver wanted to talk, but I shut him off and caught an hour's sleep.

I woke up with a pounding head when we left the Ventura Freeway. I told the driver to stop at a public pay phone. He found one and gave me change for a dollar. I dialed Lester Crandall's number.

A woman's voice which sounded as if it was being kept under strict control said: "This is the Crandall residence."

"Is Mr. Crandall home?"

"I'm afraid he isn't. I don't know when he'll be back."

"Where is he?"

"On the Strip."

"Looking for Susan?"

Her voice became more personal. "Yes, he is. Are you a friend of Lester's?"

"No. But I've seen your daughter. She isn't in Los Angeles. May I come and talk to you, Mrs. Crandall?"

"I don't know. Are you a policeman?"

I told her what I was, and gave her my name, and she responded with her address. It was on a street I knew off Sunset Boulevard.

The cab took me under the freeway to Northridge. I'd kept the key to the Broadhurst garage. I asked the driver to wait while I used the key and made sure my car was still there. It was, and it started. I went out to the street and dismissed the driver.

When I went to the back of the house a second time, I looked around more carefully. Some light came from the neighbor's on the other side of the grape-stake fence. I noticed that the back door of

Stanley Broadhurst's house was slightly ajar. I opened it all the way and turned on the kitchen lights.

There were marks in the wood around the lock which showed that it had been jimmied. It occurred to me that the man who had done the job might still be inside. I didn't want to run into him accidentally. Burglars seldom intended to kill anyone, but they sometimes killed when they were caught by surprise in their dark fantasy.

I turned off the kitchen lights and waited. The house was silent. From outside I could hear the pulsing hum of the arterial boulevard I had just left.

The neighbors were listening to the late news on television. In spite of these normal sounds, I felt a physical anxiety close to nausea. It got worse when I went into the hallway.

Perhaps I smelled or otherwise sensed the man in the study. In any case, when I switched on the light he was lying there in front of the broken desk, grinning up at me like a magician who had pulled off the ultimate trick.

I didn't recognize him right away. He had a black beard and mustache and long black hair which seemed to grow peculiarly low on his forehead. I found on closer inspection that the hair was a wig which didn't fit him too well. The beard and mustache were false.

Under the hair was the dead face of the man who called himself Al and had come to the house to ask for a thousand dollars. Come once too often. The front of his shirt was wet and heavy with blood, and there were stab wounds under it. He smelled of whisky.

The inside breast pocket of his cheap dark suit bore the label of a San Francisco department store. The pocket itself was empty, and so were his other pockets. I lifted him to feel for a wallet in his hip pockets. There was none.

I checked my notebook for the address he had given me: the Star Motel, on Pacific Coast Highway below Topanga Canyon. Then I looked at the rolltop desk which he had evidently broken open. The wood around the locking mechanism was splintered, and the rolltop section was stuck in a half-open position.

I couldn't force it far enough back to release the drawers, which stayed locked. But in one of the pigeonholes I found a pair of photographs of a young man and a young woman who at first glance looked alike. Clipped to the photographs was a piece of paper with the printed heading: "Memo from the desk of Stanley Broadhurst."

Someone, presumably Stanley, had written laboriously on it: "Have you seen this man and woman? According to witnesses they left Santa Teresa early in July, 1955, and traveled to San Francisco by car (red

Porsche, Calif. license number XUJ251). They stayed in San Francisco one or two nights, and sailed July 6 en route to Honolulu via Vancouver on the English freighter *Swansea Castle*. A thousand-dollar reward will be paid for information about their present whereabouts."

I took another look at the pictures attached to it. The girl had dark hair and very large dark eyes which looked up rather dimly out of the old photograph. Her features seemed to be aquiline and sensitive, except for her heavy passionate mouth.

The man's face, which I took to be Captain Broadhurst's, was less open. There were well-shaped bones in his face and hard, staring eyes set obliquely in them. The resemblance between him and the girl turned out to be superficial when I compared them. His bold stare kept him hidden in a way, but I guessed that he was a taker. She looked like a giver.

I turned to the filing cabinet. Its top drawer had been forced, so violently that it couldn't be properly closed. It was full of letters carefully arranged among manila dividers. The postmarks ranged over the past six years.

I picked out a fairly recent one whose return address was the Santa Teresa Travel Agency, 920 Main Street.

Dear Mr. Broadhurst [the typed letter said]:

Have checked our files as per your request and confirm that your father, Mr. Leo Broadhurst, booked double passage on the *Swansea Castle*, due to sail from San Francisco for Honolulu (via Vancouver) on or about July 6, 1955. Passage paid for, but we cannot confirm that it was used. *Suansea Castle* has changed to Liberian registry, and 1955 owners and master are hard to trace. Please advise if you wish us to check further.

Faithfully yours,
Harvey Noble, Proprietor

I looked at an older letter which was handwritten on the stationery of a Santa Teresa church and signed by the pastor, a Reverend Lowell Riceyman.

Dear Stanley [it said],

Your father Leo Broadhurst was one of my parishioners, in the sense that he sometimes attended Sunday services, as you may recall, but I have to confess that I never knew him at all well. I'm sure the fault must have been mine as much as his. He gave the impression of being a sportsman, an active and spirited man who enjoyed life. No doubt that is your recollection of him, too.

May I suggest in all good feeling and sympathy that you be content with that recollection, and not pursue any further the course you have embarked on, against my advice. Your father chose to leave your mother and you, for reasons which neither you nor I can fathom. The heart has its reasons that the reason does not know. I think it is unwise for a son to attempt to delve too deeply into his father's life. What man is without blame?

Think of your own life, Stanley. You have recently taken on the responsibilities of marriage—as I, having had the pleasure of performing the ceremony, have good cause to remember. Your wife is a fine and lovely girl, clearly more worthy of your living interest than those old passions of which you have written to me. The past can do very little for us—no more than it has already done, for good or ill—except in the end to release us. We must seek and accept release, and give release.

Concerning the marital problems of which you write me, believe me, they are not unusual. But I would prefer to discuss them with you personally, rather than commit my poor thoughts to paper. Until I see you, then.

I looked down at the dead man, and thought of the other dead man on the mountain. The Reverend Riceyman had given Stanley good advice, which he had failed to take. A feeling of embarrassment and regret went through me. It wasn't exactly grief for Stanley, though it included that.

It also included the realization that I had to call the police. I left the phone in the study untouched and went back to the kitchen. As soon as I switched on the lights, I noticed the empty brown whisky bottle standing among the dishes in the sink.

I called the Valley headquarters of the LAPD and reported a homicide. During the nine or ten minutes that the police took to answer the call, I walked halfway along the block and found Al's Volkswagen, locked. At the very last minute, when I could already hear the siren, I remembered that the engine of my car was running. I went out to the garage and turned it off.

I had a light hat in the trunk. I used it to cover my damaged head, and met the patrol car out in front of the house. The man next door came out and looked at us and went back into his house without saying anything.

I took the officers in through the back door, pointing out the jimmy marks. I showed them the dead man and told them briefly how I had happened to find him. They made a few notes and put in a call for a homicide team, suggesting politely that I stick around.

I told my story in greater detail to a captain of detectives named Arnie Shipstad, whom I had known since he was a detective-sergeant with the Hollywood division. Arnie was a fresh-faced Swede with shrewd sensitive eyes which registered the details of the study as precisely as the cameras of his photographer did.

The dead man had his picture taken with and without his wig and beard and mustache. Then he was carefully rolled onto a stretcher and carried out.

Arnie lingered. "So you think he came here for money?"

"I'm sure he did."

"But he got something different. And the man who promised him money is dead, too." He picked up Stanley's memo, which I had shown him, and read aloud: "'Have you seen this man and woman?' Is this what it's all about?"

"It could be."

"Why do you think he came here in disguise?"

"I can think of a couple of possible reasons. He may be wanted. I'd lay even money that he is wanted."

Arnie nodded in agreement. "I'll check him out. But there's another possibility, too."

"What's that?"

"He may have been wearing the outfit for fun and games. Quite a few swingers use longhair wigs when they go quail-hunting. This one may have been planning to pick up his money and have a night on the town."

I had to admit there was something in the idea.

chapter 14

I LEFT SEPULVEDA at Sunset and drove into Pacific Palisades. The Crandalls lived on a palm-lined street in a kind of Tudor manor with a peaked roof and brown protruding half-timbers.

The mullioned windows were all lighted as though a Saturday night party was going on. But the only sound I heard before I knocked was the sighing and scratching of the wind through the dry palm fronds.

A blond woman in black opened the ornately carved door. Her body was so trim against the light that I thought for a moment she was the girl. Then she inclined her head to look at me, and I saw that time had faintly touched her face and begun to tug at her throat.

She narrowed her eyes and peered past me into the darkness. "Are you Mr. Archer?"

"Yes. May I come in?"

"Please do. My husband is home now, but he's resting." Her speech was carefully correct, as if she had taken lessons in talking. I suspected that her natural speech was a good deal rougher and freer.

She led me into a formal sitting room with a blazing crystal chandelier which hurt my eyes and an unlit marble fireplace. We sat down in facing conversation chairs. Her body fell into a beautiful still pose, but her faintly pinched blond face seemed bored with it, or resentful, like an angel living with an animal.

"Was Susan all right when you saw her?"

"She wasn't hurt, if that's what you mean."

"Where is she now?"

"I don't know."

"You mentioned serious trouble." Her voice was soft and small, as if she was trying to minimize the trouble. "Please tell me what you mean,

and please be frank. This is the third night now that I've been sitting by the telephone."

"I know how it is."

She inclined toward me. Her breasts leaned out from her body. "Do you have children?"

"No, but my clients do. Susan has one of those children with her now—a small boy named Ronald Broadhurst. Have you ever heard of him?"

She hesitated for a moment, in deep thought, then shook her head. "I'm afraid I haven't."

"Ronald's father was murdered this morning. Stanley Broadhurst."

She failed to react to the name. While she listened raptly like a child at a fairy tale, I gave her an account of the day. Her hands climbed from her lap like small independent creatures with red feet, and fastened on her breasts. She said:

"Susan couldn't have done what was done to Mr. Broadhurst. She's a gentle girl. And she loves children. She certainly wouldn't hurt the little boy."

"Why would she grab him?"

The word jolted the woman. She looked at me with some dislike, as if I'd threatened the dream she was living in. Her hands fell away from her breasts.

"There must be some explanation."

"Do you know why she left home?"

"I—Lester and I haven't been able to understand it. Everything was going along smoothly. She'd been accepted at UCLA and she was on a good summer program—tennis and diving lessons and conversational French. Then on Thursday morning, when we were out shopping, she left without any warning. She didn't even say goodbye to us."

"Did you report it to the police?"

"Lester did. They told him they couldn't promise much—there are dozens of missing young people every week. But I never thought my daughter would be one of them. Susan has had a really good life. We've given her every advantage."

I nudged her back toward the hard truth: "Have there been any radical changes in Susan lately?"

"What do you mean?"

"Any big change in her habits. Like sleeping a lot more—or a lot less. Getting excited and staying that way, or turning apathetic and letting her appearance go to pot."

"None of those things. She isn't on drugs, if that's what you have in mind."

"Think about it, though. Thursday night in Santa Teresa she had what sounds like a bad trip and jumped into the ocean."

"Was Jerry Kilpatrick with her?"

"Yes. Do you know him, Mrs. Crandall?"

"He's been here at the house. We met him at Newport. He seemed like a nice enough boy to me."

"When was he here?"

"A couple of months ago. He and my husband got into an argument, and he never came back after that." She sounded disappointed.

"What was the argument about?"

"You'll have to ask Lester. They just didn't take to each other."

"May I speak to your husband?"

"He's lying down. He's had a rough couple of days."

"I'm sorry, but maybe you'd better get him up."

"I don't believe I should. Lester is no longer young, you know."

She didn't move. She was one of those dreaming blonds who couldn't bear to face a change in her life. One of those waiting mothers who would sit forever beside the phone but didn't know what to say when it finally rang.

"Your daughter's at sea with a teen-age dropout, under suspicion of child-stealing and murder. And you don't want to disturb her father." I got up and opened the door of the sitting room: "If you won't call your husband, I think I'd better."

"*I* will, if you insist."

As she passed me in the doorway I could feel the small chill presence that lived like a stunted child in her fine body. The same cold presence reflected itself in the room. The chandelier for all its blaze was like a cluster of frozen tears. The white marble mantel was tomblike. The flowers in the vases were plastic, unsmellable, giving off a dull sense of artificial life.

Lester Crandall came into the room as if he was the visitor, not I. He was a short heavy-bodied man with iron gray hair and sideburns which seemed to pincer his slightly crumpled face and hold it out for inspection. His smile was that of a man who wanted to be liked.

His handshake was firm, and I noticed that his hands were large and rather misshapen. They bore the old marks of heavy work: swollen knuckles, roughened skin. He had spent his life, I thought, working his way to the top of a small hill which his daughter had abandoned in one jump.

He was wearing a figured red-silk bathrobe over undershirt and trousers, and his face was rosy-purplish, his hair damp from the shower. I told him I was sorry to disturb him.

He waved the thought away. "I'd be glad to get up at any hour of the night, believe me. I understand you have word of my little girl?"

I told him briefly what I knew. Under the pressure of my words his face seemed to be forced back on its bones. But he refused to admit the fear that was making his eyes water.

"There must be a reason for what she's doing. Susan's a sensible girl. I don't believe she's been taking drugs."

"What you believe won't change the facts," I said.

"But you don't know her. I spent most of the evening traipsing up and down the Sunset Strip. It gave me a real insight into what's happening to the youth of today. But Susan isn't like that at all. She's very organized at all times."

He sat down heavily in one of the conversation chairs, as if the little speech on top of the long evening had exhausted him. I sat in the other.

"We won't argue," I said. "One good lead is worth all the theories in the world."

"You're very right."

"May I see Susan's address book? I understand you have it."

He looked up at his wife, who was hovering near him. "Would you get it for me, Mother? It's on the desk in the library."

After she left the room, I said to Crandall: "When something like this happens in a family, there's nearly always some advance warning. Has Susan been in any kind of trouble lately?"

"None at all. Never in her life, if you want the truth."

"Any drinking?"

"She doesn't even like it. I give her a taste of my drink now and then, but she always makes a face."

He made one himself. It stayed imprinted in his flesh as an expression of dismay. I wondered what he was remembering or trying to forget.

"What does she do for fun?"

"We're a very close family," he said. "The three of us spend a lot of time together. I own some motels up and down the coast, and the three of us go on a lot of little trips combining business and pleasure. And of course Susan has her activity program—tennis and diving lessons and French conversation."

He was like a man with his eyes closed trying to put his hands on a girl that wasn't there. I began to think I had a glimmering of the problem. It was often the same problem—an unreality so bland and smothering that the children tore loose and impaled themselves on the spikes of any reality that offered. Or made their own unreality with drugs.

"Does she spend much time on the Strip?"

"No sir, she never goes there—not to my knowledge."

"Why did you?"

"A policeman suggested it to me. He said it's a port of missing girls and he thought I might see her there."

"What kind of boys does she run with?"

"She doesn't have too much to do with boys. She's gone to some supervised parties, of course, and we've sent her to dancing school for years—ballroom as well as ballet. But as for boys, frankly I've discouraged it, the state of the modern world being what it is. Most of her friends and acquaintances are girls."

"What about Jerry Kilpatrick? I understand he visited your daughter."

Crandall flushed. "Yes. He came here back in June. He and Sue seemed to have a lot to talk about, but they shut up when I came into the room. I didn't like that."

"Didn't you have an argument with him?"

He gave me a quick narrow look. "Who told you that?"

"Your wife did."

"Women always talk too much," he said. "Yes, we had an argument. I tried to straighten the boy out on his philosophy of life. I asked him in a friendly way what he planned to do with himself, and he said all he wanted was just to get by. I didn't think that was a satisfactory answer, and I asked him what would happen to the country if everybody took that attitude. He said it had already happened to the country. I don't know what he meant by that, but I didn't like his tone. I told him if that was his philosophy of life he could leave my home and not bother coming back. The little twerp said he'd be glad to. And he left and never did come back. Which was good riddance of bad rubbish."

Crandall's face was dusky red. A pulse at the side of his forehead throbbed. My sore head throbbed in sympathy.

"Mrs. Crandall thought at the time I'd made a mistake," he said. "You know how women are. If a girl isn't married or at least engaged by age eighteen, they think she's bound to be an old maid." Crandall lifted his head as if he'd picked up a signal that was inaudible to me. "I wonder what Mother's doing in the library."

He got up and opened the door of the room, and I followed him down the hall. His body moved heavily and dolefully, as if it was weighted down by a kind of despair which hadn't yet reached his consciousness.

The sound of a woman crying came through the library door. Mrs. Crandall was standing up and sobbing against a wall of empty shelves. Crandall went to her and tried to quiet her shaking back with his hands.

"Don't cry, Mother. We'll get her back."

"No." She shook her head. "Susan will never come back here. We had no right to bring her here in the first place."

"What do you mean?"

"We don't belong in this place. Everybody knows it except you."

"That's not true, Mother. I've got a higher net worth than anybody on this block. I could buy and sell most of them."

"What good is net worth? We're like fish out of water. I've got no friends on this street—and neither has Susan."

His large hands grasped her shoulders and forced her to turn and face him. "That's just your imagination, Mother. I always get a friendly smile and nod when I drive past. They know who I am. They know I've got what it takes."

"Maybe you have. It doesn't help Susan or me."

"Help you do what?"

"Just live," she said. "I've been trying to pretend that everything is okay. But now we know it isn't."

"It will be. I guarantee it. Everything will be hunky-dory again."

"It never was."

"That's nonsense, and you know it."

She shook her head. He reached up and stopped her movement of denial with his hands, as if it was merely a physical accident. He pushed the hair back from her forehead, which looked clear and untroubled in contrast with her tear-streaked face.

She leaned on him, letting him hold her up. Her face on his shoulder was inert, and unaware of me, like that of a woman who had drowned in her own life.

Walking in a kind of lockstep, they went out into the hallway and left me alone in the room. I noticed a small red-leather book lying open on a corner table, and I sat down to look at it. The word "Addresses" was stamped in gold on the cover, and inside on the flyleaf the girl had written her name in an unformed hand: "Susan Crandall."

There were three other girls' names in the book, and one boy's name, Jerry Kilpatrick. I realized what Susan's mother had been crying about. The family had been a lonely trio, living like actors on a Hollywood set, and now there were only two of them to sustain the dream.

Mrs. Crandall came into the room and startled me out of my thoughts. She had combed her hair and washed her face and made it up quickly and expertly.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Archer, I didn't mean to break down."

"Nobody ever does. But sometimes it's a good idea."

"Not for me. And not for Lester. You wouldn't think it to look at him, but he's an emotional man, and he loves Susan."

She came over to the table. Her grief still clung to her body like a perfume. She was one of those women whose feminine quality persisted through any kind of emotional weather.

"You hurt your head," she said.

"Jerry Kilpatrick did."

"I admit I made a mistake about him."

"So did I, Mrs. Crandall. What are we going to do about Susan?"

"I don't know what to do." She stood above me sighing, leafing over the empty pages of the address book. "I've talked to the girls she knows, including the ones in here. None of them were really friends. All they ever did together was go to school or play tennis."

"That wasn't much of a life for an eighteen-year-old girl."

"I know that. I've tried to promote things for her, but nothing worked. She was afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"I don't know, but it's real. I've been fearful all along that she'd go on the run. And now she has."

I asked Mrs. Crandall to show me the girl's room, if she didn't mind.

"I don't mind. But don't mention it to Lester. He wouldn't like it."

She took me to a large room with a sliding glass door which opened onto a patio. In spite of its size, the room seemed crowded. The bedroom furniture, ivory with gold trim, was matched by stereo and television sets and a girl's work desk with a white telephone. The place suggested a pampered prisoner expected to live out her life in a single room.

The walls were hung with mass-produced psychedelic posters and pictures of young male singing groups which only seemed to emphasize the silence. There were no pictures or other traces of any actual people the girl might have known.

"As you can see," her mother said, "we gave her everything. But it wasn't what she wanted."

She opened the wardrobe closet for my inspection. It was stuffed with coats and dresses like a small army of girls crushed flat for storage and smelling of sachet. The chest of drawers was full of sweaters and other garments, like shed or unused skins. The single drawer of the dressing table was jammed with cosmetics.

There was a telephone directory lying open on the white desk. I sat on the cushioned chair in front of it and switched on the fluorescent desk lamp. The directory was open to the motel section of the yellow pages, and at the bottom of the righthand page was a small advertisement for the Star Motel.

I didn't think that this could be a coincidence, and I pointed it out to Mrs. Crandall. It suggested nothing to her. Neither did my description of Al.

I asked her to give me a recent photograph of Susan. She took me into another room, which she called her sewing room, and produced a pocket-sized high school graduation picture. The clear-eyed blond girl in it looked as if she would never lose her purity or youth or grow old or die.

"That's the way I used to look," her mother said.

"There's still a strong resemblance."

"You should have seen me when I was in high school."

She wasn't boasting, exactly. But a little earthiness was asserting itself behind her careful manner. I said:

"I wish I had. Where did you go to high school?"

"Santa Teresa."

"Is that why Susan went up there?"

"I doubt it."

"Do you have relatives in Santa Teresa?"

"Not any more." She changed the subject. "If you get any word of Susan, will you let us know right away?"

I promised, and she handed me the picture as if to seal the bargain. I put it in my pocket along with the green-covered book, and left the house. The shadows of the palms lay like splash-marks of dark liquid on the pavement and across the roof of my car.

chapter 15

THE STAR MOTEL stood with its rear end on pilings in a narrow crowded place between the highway and the sea. The lights of the all-night service station beside it shone on its yellow stucco walls and on the weathered "Vacancy" sign which hung on the office door.

I went in and tapped the hand bell on the counter. A man came plodding out of the back room and peered at me through his creased and sleepy face.

"Single or double?"

I told him I was looking for a man, and I started to give him a description of Al. He cut me short with a shake of his frowzy head. An anger that floated like a pollution near the surface of his life came up in his throat and almost choked him.

"You got no right to wake me up for that. This is a business establishment."

I laid two dollar bills on the counter. He sucked his anger back into his body and picked up the money.

"Many thanks. Your friend and his wife are in room seven."

I showed him Susan's picture. "Has she been here?"

"Maybe she has."

"You've seen her or you haven't."

"What's the rap?"

"No rap. She's just a floating girl."

"Are you her father?"

"Just a friend," I said. "Has she been here?"

"I think she was, a couple of days ago. I haven't seen her since. Anyway," he said with a slanted grin, "you got your two dollars' worth."

I left him and moved along the railed gallery. A high tide was slapping disconsolately at the pilings. The reflection of the neon from the service station floated on the water like iridescent waste.

I knocked on the door and made its tin 7 rattle. The narrow band of light which rimmed the door widened as it opened. The woman behind it tried to close it again when she saw my face, but I put my arm and shoulder in the opening and slid inside.

"Go away," she said.

"I only want to ask you a couple of questions."

"Sorry. I lost my memory." She seemed to mean it literally. "Some days I can't remember my own name."

Her voice was flat. Her face was without expression, though it was marked by the traces of past expressions around the eyes and at the corners of the mouth. She looked both young and old. Her body was muffled in a quilted pink robe, and I couldn't tell if she was a well-preserved middle-aged woman or a dilapidated girl. Her eyes were the color of the darkness in the corners of the room.

"What is your name?"

"Elegant."

"That's a striking name."

"Thank you. I picked it one day when I was feeling that way. I haven't felt that way for quite some time now."

She looked around the room as if to blame her environment for this. The bedclothes were tangled and dragging on the floor. Empty bottles stood on the dresser among tooth-marked pieces of old hamburgers. The chairs were hung with her discarded clothing.

"Where's Al?" I said.

"He should be back by now, but he isn't."

"What's his last name?"

"Al Nesters, he calls himself."

"And where's he from?"

"I'm not supposed to tell anybody that."

"Why not?"

She made a vague impatient gesture. "You ask too bloody many questions. Who do you think you are?"

I didn't try to answer that. "How long ago did Al leave here?"

"Hours. I don't know exactly. I don't keep track of the time."

"Was he wearing his longhair wig and mustache and beard?"

She gave me a blank look. "He doesn't wear any of those things."

"That you know of."

She showed a flicker of interest, even a little anger. "What is this? Are you trying to tell me he's doubletiming me?"

"He may be. When I saw him tonight, he was wearing a black wig and a beard to match."

"Where did you see him?"

"Northridge."

"Are you the man who promised him the money?"

"I represent that man." It was true in a way—I was working for Stanley Broadhurst's wife. But the statement made me feel as if I was mediating between two ghosts.

Another flicker of interest appeared in her eyes. "Do you have the thousand for him?"

"Not that much."

"You could leave me what you have."

"I don't think so."

"Enough for a bindle anyway."

"How much is that?"

"Twenty dollars would fix me up for tonight and all day tomorrow."

"I'll think about it. I'm not sure Al delivered on his side of the bargain."

"You know he did, if you're with it. He's been hanging around for days waiting to be paid off. How much longer do you expect him to wait?"

The answer was forever, but I didn't say it. "I'm not sure what he did was worth a grand."

"Don't tell me that. It was the figure mentioned." Her vague eyes narrowed. "Are you sure you're fronting for the money man? What's his name—Broadman?"

"Broadhurst. Stanley Broadhurst."

She relaxed on the edge of the bed. Before she got suspicious again, I showed her the photograph of Susan which Mrs. Crandall had given me. She looked at it with a kind of respectful envy and passed it back to me.

"I was almost as pretty as that at one time," she said.

"I bet you were, Elegant."

The sound of her name pleased her, and she smiled. "Not so long ago as you might think."

"I can believe it. Do you know this girl?"

"I've seen her once or twice."

"Recently?"

"I think so. I don't keep good track of time, I've got too much on my mind. But she was here in the last two or three days."

"What was she doing here?"

"You'll have to ask Al. He made me go out and sit in the bug. Fortunately, I'm not the jealous type, that's one good quality I have."

"Did Al make love to her?"

"Maybe he did. I wouldn't put it past him. But mainly he was trying to get her to talk. He made me mix up some acid in a Coke. That was supposed to loosen her up."

"What did she talk about?"

"I wouldn't know. He took her away someplace, and that was the last I saw of her. But I guess it had to do with the Broadman business. Broadhurst? That was what Al had on his mind all week."

"What day was she here? Thursday?"

"I don't remember offhand. I'll try to figure it out." Her lips moved in calculation, as if between that day and this she had crossed some sort of international dateline. "It was Sunday when we left Sac, I know that for certain. He took me to San Francisco to answer the ad, and we spent Sunday night there and came down here on Monday. Or was it Tuesday? What day is this again?"

"Saturday night. Early Sunday morning."

She counted on her fingers, the days and nights crossing her eyes like shadows. "I guess he made his contact Wednesday," she said. "He came back here and said we could cross the border by Saturday at the latest." She looked at me in sudden alienation. "Where is the money? What happened to it?"

"It hasn't been paid yet."

"When do we get it?"

"I don't know. I don't even know what Al was supposed to do for it."

"It's simple enough," she said. "There were this guy and this girl, and Al was supposed to locate them. You know that if you work for Broadhurst."

"Broadhurst doesn't confide in me."

"But you've seen the ad from the *Chronicle*, haven't you?"

"Not yet. Do you have a copy?"

I was moving too fast for her, and her face closed up. "Maybe I have and maybe I haven't. What do I get out of it?"

"I promise you'll get something. But if the ad came out in the San Francisco *Chronicle*, a million people must have seen it. You might as well show it to me."

She considered this proposition. Then she got a worn suitcase out from under the bed, opened it, and handed me a folded and refolded clipping. It was a two-column ad about six inches high, reproducing the pictures I had found in Stanley Broadhurst's rolltop desk. The accompanying text had been changed in part:

> Can you identify this couple? Under the name of Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Smith, they arrived in San Francisco by car on or about

July 5, 1955. It is believed they took passage for Vancouver and Honolulu aboard the *Swansea Castle*, which sailed from San Francisco July 6, 1955. But they may still be in the Bay area. A thousand-dollar reward will be paid for information leading to their present whereabouts.

I turned to the woman who called herself Elegant. "Where are they?"

"Don't ask me." She shrugged, and the movement disarranged her robe. She pulled it close about her. "I think maybe I saw the woman."

"When?"

"I'm trying to remember."

"What's her name?"

"Al didn't tell me that. He didn't tell me anything, really. But we stopped at her house on the way down here, and I got a look at her face when she came to the door. She's older now, but I'm pretty sure it's the same woman." She considered the question further. "Maybe not, though. It seems to me Al got that clipping from her."

"You mean the ad?"

"That's right. It doesn't make sense, does it? Maybe he was putting me on, or I'm remembering wrong."

"Can you tell me where her house is?"

"That," she said, "is worth money."

"How much do you want?"

"It says in the ad a thousand. If I took less, Al would kill me."

"Al won't be coming back here."

She met my eyes and held them. "You're telling me he's dead?"

"Yes."

She huddled on the edge of the bed, as if the knowledge of Al's death had chilled her. "I never thought we'd make it to Mexico." She gave me a cold darting look, like a harmless snake. "Did you kill him?"

"No."

"The cops?"

"What makes you say that?"

"He was on the run." She looked around the room. "I've got to get out of here." But she didn't move.

"Where was he on the run from?"

"He broke out of prison. He talked about it once when he was high. I should have left him when I had the chance." She stood up and made a frantic gesture. "What happened to my Volkswagen?"

"The cops probably have it by now."

"I've got to get out of here. You take me out of here."

"No. You can take a bus."

She called me a few names, which didn't bother me. But when I moved toward the door, she followed.

"How much money will you give me?"

"Nothing like a thousand."

"A hundred? That would take me back to Sac."

"Are you from Sacramento?"

"My parents live there. But they don't want to see me."

"What about Al?"

"He has no parents. He came out of an orphanage."

"Where?"

"Some city north of here. We stopped there on the way down. He pointed out the orphanage to me."

"You stopped at the orphanage?"

"You're all mixed up," she said with condescension. "He showed me the orphanage when we passed it on the highway—we didn't stop there. We stopped in town to get some money for gas and food."

"What town?"

"One of those Santa places. Santa Teresa, I think it was."

"And how did you get the money for gas?"

"Al got it from a little old lady. She gave him twenty dollars. Al's very big with little old ladies."

"Can you describe her?"

"I dunno. She was just a little old lady in a little old house on a little old street. It was kind of a pretty street, with purple flowers in the trees."

"Jacarandas?"

She nodded. "Flowering jacarandas, yeah."

"Was her name Mrs. Snow?"

"I think that was the name."

"What about the woman in the ad? Where does she live?"

A look of stupid cunning took hold of her face. "That's worth money. That's what it's all about."

"I'll give you fifty."

"Let me see it."

I got out my wallet and gave her the fifty-dollar bill that Fran Armistead had tipped me with. I was sort of glad to get rid of it, though here again I was conscious of buying and being sold at the same time, as if I'd made a down payment on the room and its occupant.

She kissed the money. "I can really use it, it's my ticket out of here." But she looked around the room as if it was a recurrent nightmare she had.

"You were going to tell me where the woman lives."

"Was I?" She was stalling, and uncomfortable about it. She forced herself to say: "She lives in this big old house in the woods."

"You're making this up."

"I am not."

"What woods are you talking about?"

"It's on the Peninsula someplace. I didn't pay good attention on the way. I was strung out on an Einstein trip."

"Einstein trip?"

"When you go all the way out, past the last star, and space loops back on you."

"Where on the Peninsula?"

She shook her head, the way you shake a watch that has stopped ticking. "I can't remember. There's all these little cities strung together. I can't remember which one."

"What did the house look like?"

"It was very old, two-storied—*three*-storied. And it had two little round towers, one on each side." She erected her thumbs.

"What color?"

"Kind of gray, I think it was. It looked kind of grayish green through the trees."

"What kind of trees?"

"Oak trees," she said, "and some pines. But mostly oak trees."

I waited for a while.

"What else do you remember about the place?"

"That's about all. I wasn't really *there*, you know. I was out around Arcturus, looking down. Oh yeah, there was a dog running around under the trees. A Great Dane. He had a beautiful voice." She woofed in imitation.

"Did he belong to the house?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. He acted lost, I remember thinking that. Will that help?"

"I don't know. What day was it?"

"Sunday, I think. I said it was Sunday, didn't I, that we left Sac?"

"You haven't given me much for my fifty."

She was dismayed, and afraid I'd take it back. "You could make love to me if you want."

Not waiting for my answer, she stood up and dropped the pink robe to the floor. Her body was young, high-breasted, narrow-waisted, almost too slender. But there were bruises on her arms and thighs like the hashmarks of hard service. She was a dilapidated girl.

She looked up into my face. I don't know what she saw there, but she said: "Al roughed me up quite a bit. He was pretty wild after all that time in prison. I guess you don't want me, do you?"

"Thanks, I've had a hard day."

"And you won't take me with you?"

"No." I gave her my business card and asked her to call me collect if she remembered anything more.

"I doubt I will. I've got a mind like a sieve."

"Or if you need help."

"I always need help. But you won't want to hear from me."

"I think I can stand it."

Leaning her hands on my shoulders, she raised herself on her toes and brushed my mouth with her sad mouth.

I went outside and folded Stanley Broadhurst's ad into the green-covered book and locked up both of them in the trunk of my car. Then I drove home to West Los Angeles.

Before I went to bed I called my answering service. Arnie Shipstad had left a message for me. The man whose body I'd found in Stanley Broadhurst's house was a recent escapee from Folsom named Albert Sweetner, with a record of a dozen or so arrests. His first arrest occurred in Santa Teresa, California.

chapter 16

IT WAS LATE at night, almost halfway to morning. I knocked myself out with a heavy slug of whisky and went to bed.

In the dream that took over my sleeping mind I was due to arrive someplace in a very short time. But when I went out to my car it had no wheels, not even a steering wheel. I sat in it like a snail in a shell and watched the night world go by.

The light coming through the bedroom blind changed from gray to off-white and woke me. I lay and listened to the early traffic. A few birds peeped. At full dawn the jays began to squawk and divebomb my window.

I'd forgotten the jays. Their sudden raucous reminder turned me cold under the sheet. I threw it off and got up and put on my clothes.

There was a last can of peanuts in the kitchen cupboard. I scattered the peanuts out the window and watched the jays come swooping into the yard. It was like watching a flashing blue explosion-in-reverse that put the morning world together again.

But the central piece was missing. I shaved and went out for breakfast and kept going.

Miles below Santa Teresa, sooner than I expected, the fire came into view above the freeway. It had burned southward and eastward along the mountains, which were black and rimmed with flames. But the mass of air which had moved in from the sea the night before seemed to be holding it back from the coastal plain and the city.

The wind was still coming from the sea. Where the freeway looped close to the water I could see the white spume drifting up from the shore and hear the surf crashing.

I stopped at the Armistead beach house. The tide was high, and the

broken water slid up the beach and wet the pilings that the house stood on. I knocked at the second-floor entrance at the rear.

Fran Armistead came to the door wearing men's pajamas. Her face was swollen with sleep. Her hair was sticking up like ruffled feathers.

"Do I know you?" she said not unpleasantly.

"Archer," I prompted her. "I brought your car back. We were fellow-refugees from the fire."

"Of course. It's rather fun being a refugee, isn't it?"

"Maybe the first time. Is your husband here?"

"I'm afraid he isn't. He went out very early."

"Do you know where?"

"He's probably at the marina. Roger's dreadfully upset about his boat. When Mr. Kilpatrick phoned him this morning, he didn't even know that it was gone."

"I take it it hasn't been heard from."

"It hadn't been when he left here. Roger's terribly angry with the Kilpatrick boy. I don't know what he'll do to him when he catches him."

"Were Roger and Jerry Kilpatrick pretty close?"

She gave me a hard look. "Not in the way you mean. Roger is terribly masculine."

She shivered, and hugged herself. I drove to the marina and parked in the almost deserted public lot. It was still very early in the morning.

I could see through the wire fence that *Ariadne*'s slip was still empty. Roger Armistead was standing on the float, looking out to sea in an attitude that seemed consciously statuesque. Brian Kilpatrick was near him, facing me. The two men seemed remote, yet tensely conscious of each other, as if they had quarreled.

Kilpatrick saw me at the gate. He came up the gangplank and let me through. He was wearing the same clothes, and he looked as if he had slept in them, or tried to.

"Armstead's in a filthy mood, I warn you," Kilpatrick said. "He blames *me* for this mess. Hell, I've barely seen Jerry in the last couple of months. He's been running out of my control. Armistead practically adopted him. *I* can't assume responsibility." But he moved his heavy shoulders as if the weight of his son was strapped to his back.

"Where would Jerry take the boat? Do you have any idea?"

"I'm afraid I don't. I'm not a yachtsman. Which is one of the reasons Jerry took up sailing. If I'd been interested in the sea, he'd have gone in for golf."

Kilpatrick had slipped in the course of the night. His voice was querulous.

"North or south?" I said.

"Probably south. Those are the waters he knew. Maybe out to the islands."

He pointed to the offshore islands which lay on the horizon like blue whales. In the twenty-mile span between them and the shore, there was nothing visible on the surface of the water.

"Have you informed the sheriff?"

He looked at me in some embarrassment. "Not yet."

"You said you were going to talk to him last night."

"I tried to, honestly. He was out on the fire line. As a matter of fact he still is."

"There must be other officers on duty."

"There are some. But all they can think about is the fire. They're involved in a major catastrophe, you know."

"So is Jerry."

"You don't have to tell me that. He's my son." He gave me an anxious sidelong look. "I heard from Crandall again, early this morning. I gather you went to see him after all."

"What did he have to say?"

"He blames the whole thing on Jerry, naturally. Boys always get the blame where a girl's concerned. According to Crandall's version, his daughter never caused them any trouble at all, until now. That's hard to believe."

"He may believe it. He and his wife seem to be slightly out of touch." My mind came up with a stereoscopic view of the girl alone in her white room at home, and the girl at the Star Motel with Al Sweetner.

"I wish you hadn't gone to Crandall," Kilpatrick said in an aggrieved voice. "It complicates things. He could make things rough for me if he wanted to."

"I'm sorry. I have to follow my case where it leads."

"It's your case, is it?"

"I'm willing to share it. If you'll wait a few minutes, we'll go and find your friend the sheriff. How about it?"

"If you say so."

I left Kilpatrick at the gate and spoke to Armistead's back. He turned deliberately. He looked both sad and angry in a strangled inexpressive way. He was wearing a yachting cap and blazer, and an ascot at his throat.

"Why didn't you tell me about this, last night? Now we may never get her back." Armistead sounded as if he was talking about a woman he had lost, or the dream of a woman. "She could be a hundred miles from here by now, or at the bottom of the sea."

"Have you told the Coast Guard?"

"Yes I have. They'll keep an eye out for her. But they're not exactly in the business of tracking down stolen boats."

"This isn't a simple case of theft," I said. "I guess you know the girl's aboard, and a little boy."

"Kilpatrick told me that."

Armistead's eyes narrowed and seemed to fasten on an ugly vision. He rubbed his knuckles in the sockets of his eyes, and turned his back on me again.

The waves were coming over the breakwater, shattering in green streaming water. Even the water in the marina was unquiet, lifting the float under our feet and letting it fall. The world was changing, as if with one piece missing the whole thing had come loose and was running wild.

Armistead walked out to the seaward end of the float. I followed him. He was a closed man, but I thought he might be getting more ready to open.

"I understand Jerry's a pretty good friend of yours."

"He was. I don't want to talk about it."

I went on anyway. "I don't blame you for being browned off. I feel the same way. He hit me over the head with a revolver last night. It looked and felt like a .38."

He said, after some hesitation: "I kept a .38 on the boat."

"And I suppose he took it with him?"

"I suppose he did. I'm not responsible."

"That's what Kilpatrick says, too. Nobody's responsible. The thing I'm trying to get at is Jerry's motivation. What do you think he's trying to accomplish?"

"Pure destruction, for all I know."

"I hope not."

"He broke faith with me." Armistead sounded resentful and betrayed, like a sailor who had come to the edge of a flat world. "I trusted him with my boat. I let him live aboard her all summer."

"Why?"

"He needed a place. I don't mean just a place to live. A place in the scheme of things. And I thought the sea would do it for him." He paused. "I was a yacht bum when I was Jerry's age. That was my main thing, if you want the truth. I couldn't stand life ashore any more than Jerry could. All I ever wanted was to get outside"—his arm swept seaward "and be with the wind and the water. You know, the sea and the sky."

Like many divided and inarticulate men, Armistead had an old-fashioned poetic streak. I tried to keep him talking.

"Where did you live when you were a boy?"

"Near Newport. That's where I met my wife. I used to crew for her first husband."

"Jerry is supposed to have met Susan Crandall in Newport."

"He may have. We sailed down there in June."

I showed him the girl's picture, but he shook his head. "So far as I know, he never brought a girl aboard her or any other girl."

"Until Thursday?"

"That's correct."

"What happened Thursday night? I'd like to get it straight."

"So would I. I gather from the scuttlebutt that the girl got high on something. She climbed the mast and dove into the water. She barely missed one of the pilings. This was about dawn on Friday morning."

"I understand Jerry's on drugs."

His face closed up. "I wouldn't know."

"His father admits he's been using them."

Armistead glanced toward the gate. Kilpatrick was still there.

"A lot of people use them," he said.

"The question may be important."

"All right. I tried to discourage it, but he was using pep pills and other dangerous drugs. It's one of the reasons I let him live aboard."

"I don't understand."

"He was less likely to get into trouble on the boat. At least, that was my theory." His face turned sullen again.

"You're fond of the boy."

"I tried to be a father to him, or a big brother. I know that sounds like corn. But I thought he was a good one, in spite of the drugs. What makes them so important?"

"I think the girl Susan had some kind of a breakdown. And she may have killed a man yesterday. Have you heard about the murder?"

"No, I haven't."

"The victim was a man named Stanley Broadhurst."

"I know a Mrs. Broadhurst who lives here."

"She's his mother. Do you know her well?"

"We don't know anyone here really well. The ones I know best are the harbor people. Fran has her own friends."

He glanced around the harbor restlessly like a sailor who had gone to sea in his youth and never moved back ashore. He looked at the town with uncomprehending eyes. It hung like a city made of fog or smoke between the restless sea and the black mountains.

"I'm not connected with any of this," Armistead said.

"Except through Jerry."

He frowned. "Jerry is finished and done with as far as I'm concerned."

I could have told him that it wasn't that easy. Jerry's real father seemed to know it already.

chapter 17

KILPATRICK WAS STANDING inside the wire gate. He looked at me like a suspect waiting to be released.

"Armistead's bitter, isn't he? He'll throw the book at Jerry."

"That I doubt. He's more let down than angry."

"I'm the one that's really let down," Kilpatrick said competitively.

I changed the subject. "Do you know where Sheriff Tremaine is this morning?"

"I know where he was an hour ago—at the main fire camp on the college grounds."

Kilpatrick volunteered to take me up there. Driving a new black Cadillac, he led me in my not-so-recent Ford to the eastern edge of the city and onto a county road which climbed into the foothills through areas where the fire had been and gone. Just before we reached the campus, we passed a walled Forest Service compound where tanker trucks and tractors were being repaired.

We were stopped at double iron gates which stood open between iron gateposts. A brass sign was bolted to one post: Santa Teresa College. The ranger who stopped us knew Kilpatrick and told us to drive on through—the sheriff was on the athletic field with the fire boss. Joe Kelsey, whom I also asked him about, had passed that way not long before in a deputy coroner's truck.

Kilpatrick and I parked behind the bleachers that overlooked the athletic field. Before I left my car I got the green-covered book out of the trunk and put it in my jacket pocket. We made our way among official cars and trucks that had assembled from all over Southern California, from the Tehachapis in the north to the Mexican border.

The athletic field resembled a staging area just back of the lines in a

major battle. On the grass oval inside the cinder track, bubble copters were landing and taking off with reinforcements.

Undisturbed by their din, smoke-jumpers lay on the grass with their closed and soot-blurred faces to the sky. There were men of every color there—Indians and blacks and weathered whites—hard-nosed, stoic, working stiffs with nothing to lose but their bedrolls and their lives.

We found Sheriff Tremaine in the main command post, which was a plain gray Forest Service trailer. The sheriff-coroner was a big-bellied man wearing a tan uniform and a Stetson. The flesh of his face hung in folds like a bloodhound's dewlaps and made his smile a strange and complex thing. He gave Kilpatrick an old-fashioned politician's handshake, with his left hand on the elbow as he pumped.

"What can I do for you, Brian?"

Kilpatrick cleared his throat. His voice came out tinny and uncertain. "My son Jerry's in a spot of trouble. He's taken Roger Armistead's sloop and gone to sea with a girl."

The Sheriff smiled his complicated smile. "It doesn't sound so serious. He'll come back."

"I was hoping you could alert the people up and down the coast."

"Maybe if there were two of me. Take it up with the men at the courthouse, Brian. We're planning to move base within twenty-four hours. And on top of everything else, I hear we've got a dead man on our hands."

"Stanley Broadhurst?" I said.

"Yessir. Do you know him?"

"I was with Joe Kelsey when his body was found. The girl that Mr. Kilpatrick is talking about is a material witness in that killing. And she and Jerry have Stanley Broadhurst's son with them."

Tremaine became more attentive, but he seemed too tired to react fully. "What do the two of you want me to do?"

"Put out an all-points alarm, as Kilpatrick suggested, with emphasis on the coastal cities and seaports. The missing boat is a sloop named 'Ariadne'." I spelled it out. "Do you have an aero-squadron?"

"I have, but the volunteer pilots are up to their necks."

"You could detach one plane and send it out to the islands. They may have anchored out there." From where I stood I could see the islands, embossed on the slanting sea.

"I'll consider it," the sheriff said. "If there's anything else, you can take it up with Joe Kelsey. He has the full cooperation of my office."

"There's one other thing, sheriff."

He bowed his head in weary patience. I produced the green-covered book and got out Stanley Broadhurst's ad from the San Francisco *Chronicle*.

The sheriff took the clipping in his hands and studied it. Kilpatrick

moved to his shoulder and looked at it, too. The two men lifted their eyes at the same time and exchanged a glance of dubious recognition.

"The man is Leo Broadhurst, of course," the sheriff said. "Who's the woman, Brian? Your eyes are better than mine."

Kilpatrick swallowed. "My wife," he said. "My ex-wife, that is."

"I thought it was Ellen. Where is she now?"

"I have no idea."

The sheriff handed the clipping back to me. "Is this connected with Stanley Broadhurst's death?"

"I think so."

I started to tell Tremaine something about the background of the case, and the dead man Al. He waved me into silence. "Take it up with somebody else. Take it up with Kelsey. Will you do me that favor, both of you? The fire boss expects to be out of here before noon tomorrow, and I'm helping him plan the move."

"Where are you moving to?" Kilpatrick said.

"Buckhorn Meadow, about sixteen miles east of here."

"Does that mean that the city is out of danger?"

"I think it should be by tomorrow, anyway. But the worst is yet to come." He looked up at the bare black slope of the mountain above us. "The first real rain, and we'll all be drowning in mud."

The sheriff opened the door of the trailer. As he levered his bulk through the narrow opening, I caught a glimpse of a tall man in a Forest Service jacket bowed over a map. He had a graying Scandinavian head, and he looked like a Viking trying to navigate a sea of land.

I turned to Kilpatrick. "You didn't tell me Leo Broadhurst ran away with your wife."

"I told you last night she left me. I don't usually bare my bosom to strangers."

"Is she still with Broadhurst?"

"I wouldn't know about that. They don't report to me."

"Did you divorce her?"

"She divorced me soon after she left here."

"And married him?"

"I assume so. They didn't send me a wedding invitation."

"Where did she divorce you?"

"In Nevada."

"Where is she now—in the Bay area?"

"I haven't the slightest notion where she is. Now if you don't mind we'll change the subject."

But he couldn't leave it alone. Anger or some other emotion was running through him in a gross vibration which made his voice tremble.

"That was a dirty trick you pulled on me just now, showing that picture to Sheriff Tremaine."

"What was dirty about it?"

"It put me on the spot in front of him. You could at least have brought it up in private. You didn't have to shoot me down in public."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know it was your wife."

He gave me a look of disbelief so naked that it made me question myself. Perhaps I had had a hunch just below the level of consciousness.

"Let me have another look at that picture," he said.

I handed him the clipping. He stood and examined it, oblivious of the action around him and the clatter of helicopters overhead, like a man on the rim of the present peering down into the deep past. When he looked up, his face had been changed by it. It seemed older and more defensive.

He gave me back the clipping. "Where did you get this? From Jerry?"

"No."

"Did Stanley Broadhurst put that ad in the *Chronicle*?"

"Apparently," I said. "Have you seen it before?"

"I may have. I don't remember if I did."

"Then how would you know it was printed in the *Chronicle*?"

He answered smoothly: "I simply took it for granted. The styling looks like the *Chronicle*." After a moment's intense thought, he added: "San Francisco is mentioned in the text."

It was too good an answer, but I let it pass. "What made you ask if I got the ad from your son Jerry?"

"It was just a thought," he said with a one-sided grimace. "Jerry's been very much on my mind, and I happen to know he reads the *Chronicle*. He thinks San Francisco is the center of the known world."

"Did Jerry see a copy of this ad?"

"He may have. How would I know?"

"I think you do know, Kilpatrick."

"I don't give a damn what you think."

He brought up his clenched fist, ready to swing at me. I got ready to block it. He pulled his fist in to his chest and looked down at it as if it was a small animal which had momentarily got out of control. Then he turned abruptly and went behind the bleachers, moving in hurried uncertainty as if he was going to be sick.

I went after him at a little distance. He was leaning against a supporting post with his head hanging. The look I surprised on his face was one of terrible disappointment.

He straightened up and put on an expression of weary patience which fitted the lines of his face. "You're giving me a hard time," he said to me. "Why?"

"You're a hard man to get information from."

"Really? I've practically told you my life story. It isn't all that interesting."

"I think it is. You've as good as admitted that Jerry saw a copy of this ad. It could explain a number of things."

"I'm not admitting anything, but give me a for-instance."

"He may have got in touch with Stanley Broadhurst and helped to stir him up."

"Stanley didn't need any stirring up. He's been hipped on this subject for years. He never forgave his father for leaving him and his mother."

"Did you ever discuss it with Stanley?"

"Yes, I did."

"Did you tell him that your wife ran off with his father?"

"I didn't have to. He knew it very well. Everyone knew it."

"Who do you mean by 'everyone'?"

"All the people concerned. The affair was no great secret in town, but at least most people have forgotten it by now." Kilpatrick was beginning to look sick again. "Couldn't we forget it, too? It isn't my favorite subject."

"How does Jerry feel about it?"

"He blames me. I told you that. It suits him to believe that his mother left me because I deserved it."

"Has he ever visited her?"

"Not to my knowledge. You don't quite understand the situation. Ellen left me fifteen years ago and cut off all contact. The last word I had from her was her divorce notice, and that came from her lawyer in Reno."

"What was the lawyer's name?"

"I couldn't tell you at this late date."

I got out the green-covered book again, opened it to the flyleaf, and showed Kilpatrick the bookplate with the peacock-plume engraving.

"Ellen Strome was your ex-wife's maiden name, I gather."

"Yes."

"If Jerry hasn't seen her, where did he get this book?"

"She left it in the house. She left a lot of her things behind."

"Why did she go so abruptly?"

"It wasn't so abrupt. I saw it coming. She didn't really like me, and she didn't like my business. I was just another real estate salesman in those days. She didn't approve of my seven-day week, with the phone ringing all the time and having to be nice to little old ladies from Dubuque. Ellen wanted something more refined. More romantic." His voice was laced with sarcasm and regret.

"Is that what Leo Broadhurst was—romantic?"

"I wouldn't know, I'm not a woman. Broadhurst didn't come in on my wave-length that way."

"How did he come in?"

"He went for women the way some men go deer-hunting—pitting his skills, you know? Ellen shouldn't have taken him so seriously. Neither should his son Stanley. But I think maybe Stanley was trying to convince himself that there was some deep significance to his father's affair. He wanted to find his father and get an explanation out of him."

"Who killed Stanley?"

Kilpatrick lifted his heavy shoulders and let them drop. "Who knows? I doubt that the murder's connected with that old business."

"It almost has to be," I said.

Kilpatrick looked at me levelly. A kind of angry brotherhood had been growing between us. It was partly based on the fact, which he didn't know, that my wife had walked out on me and sent me divorce papers through a lawyer. And partly that we were two middle-aging men, and three young people had slipped away over the curve of the world.

"Okay," he said. "Jerry saw the ad in the *Chronicle*. That was around the end of June. He recognized his mother from her pictures, and he seemed to think I should do something about it. I told him he was simply making trouble for himself. It was his mother's choice to walk out on us. We couldn't do anything now but try to forget it."

"What was his reaction?"

"He walked out on me, too. But you know all this." Kilpatrick seemed to be losing interest in his own life.

chapter 18

He got into his car and headed back toward the gate. I walked in the opposite direction, to the western side of the college grounds.

From the edge of the mesa a path meandered downhill toward the decimated grove where the fire had started. I could see a panel truck there, and two men moving around it, small in the distance. One of them moved with clumsy speed, like Kelsey.

I went down the path, which passed through burned-out areas in the brush. A firebreak had been bulldozed along a line that ran roughly parallel with the path, and below it. There were places where the fire had jumped the firebreak, but it had been put out on the other side, the side where the city lay. The live body of the fire, when I looked back, seemed to be far up the mountainside and moving away eastward.

The hillside path was littered with black sticks and gray ashes. Stepping carefully among the leavings of the fire, I worked my way down to the broad shelf where the Broadhurst family's mountain cabin had stood. It had been built of wood, and there was virtually nothing left but several sets of bedsprings, a stove, a blackened tin sink.

I passed the place where the stable had been. The burned-out body of Stanley's convertible was sitting in the open, its tireless rims sunk in the ashes of the building. It looked like a relic of an ancient civilization, ruined and diminished by the passage of centuries, already half buried among their droppings.

The panel truck had a sheriff-coroner's decal on the side. It was parked in the lane that led up to the ridge road. There was someone in the cab, but the morning glare on the windshield kept me from seeing who it was.

Beyond the truck, through the denuded trees, I could see a uniformed man digging and Kelsey watching him. There was a pile of dirt between them. A *déjà vu* feeling gave me a twinge of basic doubt, as if the burial and the digging-up might be repeated daily from now on.

Jean Broadhurst got down out of the truck and lifted her hand to me. She had on the same mod clothes as the day before, and against the surreal background of burned trees she looked more than ever like a lost and widowed Columbine. She was wearing no makeup. Even her mouth was pale.

"I didn't expect to see you here," I said.

"They asked me to come with them and identify Stanley's body."

"They're a little late about getting to it, aren't they?"

"Mr. Kelsey couldn't get a deputy coroner here until now. But it doesn't matter to Stanley. And it doesn't matter to me."

She was in a chancy mood, rational and composed and on the edge. I wanted to tell her I had seen her son, but I couldn't think of a way that wouldn't scare her. I asked her how her mother-in-law was doing.

"She's suffering from exhaustion. But Dr. Jerome says she has great recuperative powers."

"Does she remember about this?" I motioned toward the digging.

"I don't really know. The doctor told me not to bring up anything painful, which rather tends to limit the conversation."

Jean was trying hard to sustain a style. But the effort she was making had the effect of silencing me. We stood and looked at each other in embarrassment, as if we shared some guilty knowledge.

"I caught a glimpse of Ronny last night," I said.

"What are you trying to tell me? That he's dead?" Her somber eyes were ready for any horror.

"He was very much alive." I told her where, and when.

"Why didn't you let me know last night?"

"I was hoping to bring you better news."

"That means there isn't any."

"At least he isn't dead, and there was no sign that he was being mistreated."

"But why did they *take* him? What are they trying to do?"

"That isn't clear. It's a complex case involving a number of people, and at least one known criminal. Do you remember the man who came to your house in Northridge yesterday?"

"The one who wanted money? How could I forget him?"

"He came back later and broke into your house. I found him dead in your husband's study last night."

"Dead?"

"Somebody knifed him. Does anyone besides your family have access to your house?"

"No, not anyone." She was trying to comprehend this second death. "Is his body still in the house?"

"No, it was taken out. I called the police. But the study is pretty much of a shambles."

"It hardly matters," she said. "I've decided not to go back to that house, ever."

"This is a poor time to make a decision."

"It's the only time I have."

The rhythmic sound of spading had ceased in the grove, and Jean turned toward the sudden emptiness. The digging man was almost out of sight in the hole. Like a man growing laboriously out of the earth, he stood up with Stanley's body clasped in his arms. He and Kelsey laid the body on a stretcher and brought it toward us through the naked tree trunks.

Jean watched it come as if she dreaded its arrival. But when they laid it on the tail-gate of the truck she walked steadily toward it and looked down without flinching into the dirt-filled eyes. She pushed the dead man's hair back and bent over to kiss his forehead. The action had a heightened reality, as if she was an actress playing a tragic role.

She stayed beside her husband for some time. Kelsey didn't question her or disturb her. He introduced me to the deputy coroner, a serious-faced young man named Vaughan Purvis.

"What killed him, Mr. Purvis? The pickax wounds?"

"I'd say the pickax wounds were secondary. He was stabbed in the side with a sharp instrument, probably a knife."

"Has the knife been found?"

"No, but I plan to make a further search."

"I don't think you'll find it here."

I told Purvis and Kelsey about the dead man I'd found in Stanley's house in Northridge. Kelsey said he'd be getting in touch with Arnie Shipstad. Deputy Purvis, who had been listening quietly, broke into unexpectedly emotional speech:

"It looks like a conspiracy, probably the Mafia at work."

I said that I doubted the Mafia was involved. Kelsey pretended delicately not to have heard him.

"Then what do you make of it all?" Purvis asked me. "Who stabbed him and drove that pickax into the back of his head? Who dug that grave for him?"

"The blond girl is a prime suspect," I said experimentally.

"I don't believe it," Purvis said. "This ground is heavy adobe, and

it's dry—almost like brick. That hole went down at least four feet. I don't believe any girl could have chopped it out."

"She may have had an accomplice. Or Stanley Broadhurst may have dug it himself. He was the one who borrowed the tools from the gardener."

Purvis looked puzzled. "Why would a man dig his own grave?"

"He may not have known it was going to be his," I said.

"You don't think he was planning to kill his son," Purvis said, "like Abraham with Isaac in the Bible?"

Kelsey let out a sardonic laugh, and Purvis went red with embarrassment. He trudged back toward the grave to pick up his spade.

When he was out of hearing, Kelsey said:

"The gardener may be lying about the tools. He may have come up here and used them himself. Don't forget he lent the girl his car, and lied about it."

"Fritz is still on your list of suspects, then."

Kelsey scratched at his short gray hair. "He has to be. I've been doing a little digging into his record."

"He has a record?"

"Not much of a one, but in my book it's significant. When Fritz was in his late teens he was convicted of a sex crime. It was a first offense—at least that was known of—and the judge allowed him juvenile status and sent him to the county forestry camp."

"What crime did he commit?"

"Statutory rape. I'm particularly interested, because these sex incidents sometimes crop up in the histories of firebugs. I'm not saying Fritz is a firebug—I have no evidence for that. But in camp he got interested in firefighting, and he even helped put out a couple of fires in the back country."

"Is that bad?"

"It's indicative," Kelsey said gravely. "Don't quote me to any firemen—as a matter of fact, I used to be one myself—but firemen and firebugs are sometimes brothers under the skin. They're both fascinated by fires. Apparently Fritz Snow was so fascinated that when he got out of camp he went to work for the Forest Service."

"I'm surprised they took him."

"He had some pretty good backing. Captain Broadhurst and his wife went to bat for him. The Forest Service didn't make a fireman out of him, but they gave him some training and a job running a bulldozer. As a matter of fact, he helped to build that trail." Kelsey pointed toward the trail which went down the side of the bluff into the canyon. "Fritz and his crewmates did a fair job—it's still in pretty good shape after fifteen years.

But he didn't last long in the Forest Service. Too many personal problems, to put it mildly."

"Did they fire him on account of his personal problems?"

"I don't know why they fired him. There's no notation in the file, and it was before my time."

"Fritz could tell you."

"Yeah. But it isn't going to be easy. Yesterday afternoon, when I tried to talk to him again, his mother wouldn't let me back into the house. She defends that hopeless son of hers like a wildcat."

"Maybe she'll let me in. I want to talk to her anyway. The dead man in Northridge, Al Sweetner, picked up some money from Mrs. Snow last week."

"How much money?"

"We'll have to ask her." I looked at my watch. "It's ten-fifteen now. Can you meet me out in front of her house at eleven?"

"I'm afraid I can't," Kelsey said. "I want to get in on the preliminary examination of this body. You go and talk to Fritz. There has to be a reason for all the fear he has in him."

Kelsey's voice was cool and rather uncomprehending. He talked about fear as if he had never experienced that emotion. Perhaps the rea son for his being a fire investigator, I thought, was a puzzled need to understand what made emotional types like Fritz commit their hot foolish crimes.

"Who was the girl he raped?"

"I don't know who she was. The case was handled in Juvenile Court, and the record of it is sealed. I picked up my information from the old-timers at the courthouse."

chapter 19

JEAN WAS LOOKING DOWN into her husband's face as if she wondered how it felt to be dead. When Purvis came marching back, with his spade over his shoulder, she gave a start and turned away. Purvis set the spade down quietly and carefully.

He unbuttoned the breast pocket of his uniform and took out a black leather folder with Stanley's name printed in gold inside. It contained his driver's license and other identification, a number of credit cards and membership cards, and three dollar bills.

"He didn't have much left," the young man said.

I was struck by the feeling in his voice. "Did you know Stanley Broadhurst?"

"I knew him just about all my life, starting back in grade school."

"I thought he went to private school."

"He did, after he left grade school. He had some kind of trouble that summer, and his mother put him in a special school."

"The summer his father went away?"

"That's right. Stanley had a lot of bad luck in his life." He spoke with a certain awe. "I used to envy him back there in grade school. His people were rich, and we were as poor as Job's turkey. But I'll never envy him again."

I looked around for Jean. She had wandered off in the direction of the stable, and seemed to be searching for a means of escape. She reminded me of the frightened doe I had seen the day before, but there was no fawn with her.

When I reached her, she was standing beside the incinerated car. "Was this ours?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Do you have transportation, Mr. Archer? I've got to get out of here."

"Where do you want to go?"

"Elizabeth's house. I spent the night at the hospital."

I told Kelsey where we were going and said I might see him later, in the pathology department of the hospital. Jean and I started up the hillside path. She took the lead, moving quickly, like a woman trying to climb out of the present.

Near the bleachers where my car was parked, a number of plywood tables had been set up on trestles. A hundred or more men were seated at them, eating mulligan stew dispensed by a motorized chuckwagon.

Most of the men looked up as we passed. Some whistled; a few cheered. Jean kept going, her head down. She climbed into my car as if she was being pursued.

"It's my fault," she said in self-loathing. "I shouldn't be wearing these clothes."

We drove a long way around through the outskirts of the city. I tried to question her about her husband, but she was unresponsive. She sat with her head down, deep in her own thoughts.

When we entered Mrs. Broadhurst's canyon, she straightened up and began to look around her. The fire had come down nearly as far as the entrance to the canyon and left its scorch-marks on the trees and on the hillside brush.

Most of the houses in Canyon Estates were untouched. A few had been burned, as if picked out at random. There was nothing left of one house but a stone fireplace and a statue of Venus standing up out of rubble and wilted pipes. A man and a woman were poking among the ruins.

The random pattern of the fire persisted as we went further into the canyon. Mrs. Broadhurst's avocado trees seemed unharmed, but the olive trees beyond them had burned black. The eucalyptus trees that towered over the tile roof of the house had lost most of their branches and all their leaves. The barn had burned. The house itself was scorched but intact.

Jean had a key, and we went in together. The closed house was full of the bitter smell of fire, and seemed abandoned. The worn Victorian furniture looked ready for the junk heap.

Even the mounted birds in their glass cases looked as if they had seen better days. An acorn woodpecker had only one glass eye. The breasts of the robins had faded. They looked like imitation birds made to lend life to a dead and scruffy world.

"Excuse me," Jean said. "I've got to find something black."

She disappeared into the other wing of the house. I had decided to call Willie Mackey, a San Francisco detective who had worked with me on

other cases. Looking for a telephone, I went into a kind of den adjoining the living room. There were ancestral tintypes on the walls. A man with mutton chop whiskers and a high winged collar glared at me from a black frame, as if daring me to make something of his whiskers.

His look reminded me of Mrs. Broadhurst, but it didn't help me to understand her. I had seen her young and forceful, then sick and doddering. I needed something to fill up the gap between those versions of her, something that would explain why her husband had left her or why her son hadn't been able to.

The room contained among other things a black leather couch which made me want to lie down, and a kneehole desk made of burnished cherrywood. There was a telephone on the desk, sitting on top of a worn leather folder.

I sat down at the desk, with my knees snug in the knee-holes, and dialed Willie Mackey's office on Geary Street in San Francisco. The girl on duty switched me to his apartment on the top floor of his building.

Another girl answered in a less businesslike voice, and then Willie came to the phone.

"Call me back, Lew. You caught me in the midst of the act of love."

"You call me." I read off Mrs. Broadhurst's phone number to him.

Then I lifted the phone and opened the leather folder under it. There were several sheets of foolscap in the folder, and a faded map drawn in ink on creased and yellowing paper. The map showed about half of the Santa Teresa coastal plain; roughly penned in at the back of it were foothills and mountains resembling thumb-prints and paw-prints.

In the upper righthand corner of the map, someone had written:

U.S. Land Commission
Robert Driscoll Falconer
Ex Mission Santa Teresa
Filed in office June 14, 1866
John Berry

The top sheet of foolscap was covered with Spencerian handwriting. Under the heading "'Memories,' by Elizabeth Falconer Broadhurst," I read:

The Santa Teresa County Historical Society has asked me to set down some notes concerning my family. My paternal grandfather, Robert Driscoll Falconer, was the son of a Massachusetts scholar and businessman and a student and disciple of Louis Agassiz. Robert Driscoll Falconer fought in the Union Army and on May 3, 1863, was

wounded, almost mortally, at the Battle of Chancellorsville. But he lived to tell me about it in his old age.

He came to the Pacific Coast to recuperate from his injuries and acquired, in part through purchase but chiefly through marriage, a holding of several thousand acres which became known as Falconer Ranch. Much of this ranch was originally part of the Mission Lands, secularized in 1834 and becoming part of a Mexican Land Grant which passed by way of my grandmother to my grandfather, and thence to my father, Robert Falconer, Jr.

It is difficult for me to write objectively about my late father. He was the third in the male line of Falconers to attend Harvard College. He was more of a naturalist and scholar than a rancher or businessman. My father has been criticized for dissipating some of the family holdings. His reply would be that he had more important things to do with his life. He became a noted amateur ornithologist, author of the first checklist of native species to be found in the Santa Teresa region. His rich collection of skins both local and exotic became the nucleus of the bird collection of the Santa Teresa Museum.

At this point the Spencerian writing began to deteriorate:

I have heard false rumors that my father was a wanton killer of songbirds and that he killed them because he loved to kill. Nothing could be further from the truth! He killed birds only for scientific reasons, in order to preserve the evanescent beauty of their markings. He loved the colorful little fliers which science compelled him to shoot.

I can attest to this from personal observation. I accompanied my father on many of his expeditions here and abroad, and many were the times I came upon him weeping openly over the perforated body of the warbler, or the thrush, which he held in his kind masculine hand. Sometimes we wept together, he and I, hid in some wooded recess of our home canyon. He was a good man and a crack shot, and when he bestowed the gift of death he did so instantly, painlessly, with no mistake about it. Robert Driscoll Falconer, Jr., was a god come down to earth in human guise.

Toward the end, the handwriting went to pieces. It straggled across the lined yellow page like a defeated army.

I started to go through the drawers of the desk. The top one on the righthand side was stuffed with bills. Some of them had been unpaid for months and had special little messages written across them:—"Immediate

payment will be appreciated," "In case of further delay, the matter will be placed in the hands of legal counsel."

In the second drawer I found an old wooden gun case and opened it. Fitted into its shaped felt lining were a pair of German target pistols. They were old, but oiled and gleaming like strange blue jewels.

I lifted one of the pistols out of the case and hefted it in my hand. It was so light and so well balanced that it seemed to come up of its own accord to eye level and let me sight along it. I aimed it at the picture of the man with the whiskers, but that only made me feel foolish. I carried it to the window to find something better to aim at.

No birds. But there was a circular bird feeder on a metal pole set in cement. A rat was eating the few kernels of grain left in the feeder. I pointed the empty gun at him. He ran down the pole and disappeared in the black ravine.

chapter 20

"WHAT IN THE world are you doing?" Jean said behind me.

"Playing games."

"Put it away, please. Elizabeth wouldn't like you to be handling her pistols."

I returned the gun to its case. "They're a pretty pair."

"I don't think so. I hate all guns."

She fell silent, but her eyes were full of further things to say. The girl had changed her short bright dress for a black one that covered her knees but didn't fit her. She reminded me of an actress again, this time a young woman playing the part of an older one.

"Do I look all right?" She sounded anxious, as if in the absence of her son, the death of her husband, she doubted who she was.

"You couldn't look any other way."

She pushed the compliment away as if it might contaminate her and backed onto the couch, pulling her legs up under her black skirt so that they were completely hidden.

I closed the gun case and put it away. "Were those her father's guns?"

"Yes. They belonged to Elizabeth's father."

"Does she use them?"

"If you mean does she shoot birds now, the answer is no. The guns are precious relics of the great man. Everything in this house is some kind of a relic. I feel like one myself."

"Is that Elizabeth's dress?"

"Yes it is."

"Are you thinking of living in this house?"

"I may. It suits my mood."

She bowed her head and sat in a listening attitude as if the black dress was wired for sound like a space suit. "Elizabeth used to shoot a lot of birds. She taught Stanley to do it. It must have worried him, or he wouldn't have told me about it. Apparently it worried his mother, too. She gave up shooting entirely long before I knew her.

"But my father never did," she said surprisingly, "at least not as long as my mother stayed with him. My father loved to shoot at anything that moved. And mother and I had to pluck the quail he shot, and the pigeons. After my mother left my father, I never went back to see him."

She had jumped from Stanley's family to her own without any transition. Wondering why, I said:

"Are you thinking of going back to your family now?"

"I have no family. Mother's remarried and living in New Jersey. The last I heard of my father he was running a sportfishing boat in the Bahamas. Anyway, I couldn't face either of them. They'd blame me for everything that's happened."

"Why?"

"They just would, that's all. Because I went away and put myself through school. Neither of them approved of my doing that. A girl is supposed to do what she's told." Her voice was stony with resentment.

"Who do you blame for everything that's happened?"

"Myself, of course. But I blame Stanley, too." She lowered her eyes again. "I know that's a dreadful thing to say. I can forgive him for the girl. And all that foolish business about his father. But why did he have to take—bring Ronny with him?"

"He wanted money from his mother, and Ronny's visit was part of the transaction."

"How do you know that?"

"Elizabeth said so."

"She would. She's a cold woman." She added as if in apology to the house: "I shouldn't say that. She's suffered a lot. And Stanley and I haven't been much comfort to her. We've taken a great deal, and haven't given much."

"What have you taken?"

"Money." She sounded angry at herself.

"Does Elizabeth have much money?"

"Of course she's wealthy. She must have made a fortune out of the Canyon Estates development, and she still has hundreds of acres left."

"They're not producing much, except for a few acres of avocados. And she seems to have a lot of unpaid bills."

"That's just because she's rich. Rich people never pay their bills. My

father used to run a small sports shop in Reno, and the ones who could best afford to pay were the very ones he had to threaten to take to court. Elizabeth has thousands a year from her grandfather's estate."

"How many thousands a year?"

"I don't really know. She's close-mouthed about her money. But she has it."

"Who gets it if she dies?"

"Don't say that!" Jean sounded scared and superstitious. She added in a more controlled voice: "Dr. Jerome says she's going to be okay. Her attack was just the result of overexertion and strain."

"Can she talk all right?"

"Of course. But I wouldn't bother her today if I were you."

"I'll take it up with Dr. Jerome," I said. "But you haven't answered my other question. Who gets her money when she dies?"

"Ronny does." Her voice was low, but her body was tense with feeling she couldn't hold. "Are you worried about who will pay you? Is that why you're hanging around here when you should be out looking for him?"

I didn't try to answer her, but sat and maintained a low profile for a while. Anger and grief were alternating in her like an electric current. She turned the anger against herself, taking the hem of her skirt between her hands and pulling at it as if she was trying to tear it.

"Don't do that, Jean."

"Why shouldn't I? I hate this dress."

"Then take it off and put on another one. You mustn't go to pieces."

"I can't stand waiting."

"It may stretch out for a while, and you've got to stand it."

"Isn't there anything more we can do? Can't you go out and find him?"

"Not directly. There's too much ground to cover. And too much water." She looked so cast down that I added: "But I do have one or two leads." I got out the advertisement again, with its picture of Stanley's father and Kilpatrick's wife. "Have you seen this?"

She bent her head over the clipping. "I didn't see it until some time after it came out. Stanley placed it in the *Chronicle* without telling me, when we were in San Francisco last June. He didn't tell his mother, either, and when she saw it she was furious."

"Why?"

"She said he was bringing the whole scandal back to life. But I don't suppose anyone cared, really, except for her and Stanley."

And Jerry Kilpatrick, I thought, and Jerry's father, and possibly the woman herself. "Do you know who this woman is?"

"Her name was Kilpatrick, according to Elizabeth. She was married to a local real estate man, Brian Kilpatrick."

"What kind of terms are he and Elizabeth on?"

"Very good terms, I think. They're partners, or co-investors, in Canyon Estates."

"What about Kilpatrick's son Jerry?"

"I don't think I know him. What does he look like?"

"He's a lanky boy about nineteen, with long reddish brown hair and a beard. Very emotional. He hit me over the head with a gun last night."

"Is he the one who took Ronny away on the yacht?"

"He's the one."

"I may know him after all." Her sight turned inward and stayed that way for a while, as if she was doing a sum in mental arithmetic. "He didn't have a beard then, but I think he came to our house one night last June. I only saw him for a moment. Stanley took him into the study and shut the door. But I believe he had that clipping with him." Her head came up. "Do you think he's trying to strike back at us? Because his mother eloped with Stanley's father?"

"It's possible. I think the boy really cares about his mother. In fact, he may be on his way to her now."

"Then we've got to find her," Jean said.

"I agree with you. If I can believe my informant, the ex-Mrs. Kilpatrick is living somewhere south of San Francisco, on the Peninsula."

She seized on the lead because it was the only one. "Will you go there for me? Today?"

The life was coming back into her face. I hated to disappoint her. "I'd better stay here until we get something definite. Jerry sailed in the Ensenada race last summer, and he may have gone that way."

"To Mexico?"

"A lot of young people are ending up there. But our lead on the Peninsula ought to be checked out."

She stood up. "I'll go myself."

"No. You stay here."

"Here in this house?"

"Here in town, anyway. I doubt that this is a kidnaping for ransom. But if it is, you're the one they'll be getting in touch with."

She looked at the phone as if it had just spoken. "I have no money."

"You've just been telling me about Mrs. Broadhurst's money. You can raise some if you have to. As a matter of fact, I'm glad you brought the subject up."

"Because I haven't paid you?"

"I'm not anxious. But we're going to need some actual cash pretty soon."

Jean was getting disturbed again. She moved around the little room, awkward and angry in her ill-fitting black dress.

"I'm not going to ask Elizabeth for money. Of course, I could go and look for a job."

"At the moment, that isn't very realistic."

She paused in front of me. We exchanged a quick stabbing glance. It carried the possibility that we could be passionate enemies or friends. There was angry heat stored up in her like deep hot springs beyond the reach of her marriage or her widowhood.

She said in a more confident voice, as if she had somehow taken my measure: "Speaking of realism, what are you going to do to get my son back?"

"I have a call in to a man named Willie Mackey who runs a detective agency in San Francisco. He knows the Bay area thoroughly and I'd like to co-opt him."

"Do that. I can raise the money." She seemed to have made a decision involving more than money. "What are *you* going to do?"

"Wait—and ask questions."

She made an impatient movement and sat on the couch again. "All you do is ask questions."

"I get tired of it, too. Sometimes people tell me things without being asked, but you're not one of them."

She looked at me distrustfully. "That's just another question, isn't it?"

"Not exactly. I was thinking you've had a strange marriage."

"And you want me to tell you about it," she stated.

"If you want to, I'm willing to listen."

"Why should I?"

"You got me into this."

The reminder touched off her anger again—it was very near the surface. "I've always known about voyeurs. But you're an auditeur, aren't you?"

"What are you so ashamed of?"

"I'm not ashamed," she said hotly. "Leave me alone. I don't want to talk about it."

I sat without speaking for a couple of minutes. I suspected I was half in love with her, partly because she was Ronny's mother but also because she was beautiful and young. The body sheathed in her tight black dress seemed infinitely poignant.

But her widowhood seemed to project around her a circle of shadow which I couldn't enter. Besides, as I reminded myself, I was nearly twice her age.

She was looking at me with candid eyes, as if she had heard my thoughts. "I hate to admit it," she said, "I never have admitted it until now. My marriage was a failure. Stanley lived in a world of his own, and I couldn't reach him. Maybe if he was alive, he would say the same thing about me. But we never actually discussed it. We just went our separate ways in the same house. I looked after Ronny, and Stanley got more and more wrapped up in searching for his father. I used to look in on him late at night sometimes, when he was working in his study. Sometimes he'd be just sitting there shuffling through his pictures and his letters. He looked like a man counting his money," she said with her quick disorganized smile.

"But I shouldn't be making light of him," she added. "I should have taken the whole thing much more seriously. The Reverend Riceyman advised me to. He said that Stanley was looking for his own lost self, and I'm beginning to realize he was right."

"I'd like to talk to Riceyman."

"So would I. Unfortunately he's dead."

"What did he die of?"

"Old age. I really miss him. He was a nice man, with a lot of understanding. But I didn't listen to him. I was angry, and jealous."

"Jealous?"

"Of Stanley and his parents, and their wrecked marriage. I felt as if it was competing with my own marriage, gradually edging it out of the picture. Stanley was living more and more in the past, and getting more and more impatient with me. Maybe if I had tried harder, I could have stopped him. Then all at once it was too late. That ad he placed in the *Chronicle* touched off this whole disaster, didn't it?"

I didn't have to answer her. The phone rang.

It was Willie Mackey. "Hello, Lew. Mission accomplished. Now what can I do for you?"

"I'm looking for a woman, aged forty or so. When she left Santa Teresa fifteen years ago her name was Ellen Strome Kilpatrick. She was traveling with a man named Leo Broadhurst. He may or may not be living with her now. According to my slightly freaked-out informant, she's staying on the Peninsula now, in an old house two or three stories high, with a pair of towers. And trees around it, oaks and some pines."

"Can't you pinpoint it any better? There are still a lot of trees on the Peninsula."

"There was a Great Dane in the neighborhood a week ago today. He acted lost."

"What's Ellen's background?"

"She's the divorced wife of a real estate man here in Santa Teresa: Brian Kilpatrick. He told me that she graduated from Stanford."

Willie uttered a clicking sound of satisfaction. "That means we start in Palo Alto. The Stanford grads go back there like homing pigeons. Do you have a picture of Ellen Strome Kilpatrick?"

"I have one from an ad in the *Chronicle* that came out late in June. It shows her and Leo Broadhurst as of fifteen years ago when they arrived in San Francisco, using the name Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Smith."

"I have the ad in my clipping file," Willie said. "As I recall, it offers a thousand-dollar reward."

"You have a good memory for money."

"Yes, I do. I just got married again. Am I in line for the reward?"

"Unfortunately the man who offered it is dead." I told him how Stanley had died, and the rest of it.

"What makes Ellen so important?"

"I intend to ask her. Don't you ask her, though. When you find her let me know and I'll take it from there."

I said goodbye to him and then to Jean. Her mood had changed, and she didn't want me to go and leave her alone. Before I closed the front door of the house I could hear her angry crying.

chapter 21

ALONG MRS. SNOW'S street the jacaranda blossoms hung like purple clouds caught and condensing on the branches of the trees. I sat in my car for a minute and rested my eyes on them. Brown-skinned children were playing in the yard next door.

The curtain over Mrs. Snow's front window twitched like an eyelid with a tic. Then she came out and approached my car. She was wearing rusty silk that resembled armor and her face was blanched with powder, as if she was expecting an important visitor.

Not me. She said in controlled fury: "You have no right to do this. You're persecuting us."

I climbed out and stood with my hat in my hand. "That's not my intention, Mrs. Snow. Your son's an important witness."

"But he doesn't have to talk without a lawyer. I know that much—he's been in trouble before. But this time he's as innocent as a little newborn babe."

"That innocent?"

She stood unsmiling, blocking the way to her house. The elders of the family next door, sensing the possibility of trouble, quietly came outside. They drifted in our direction like a forming audience.

Mrs. Snow gave them a long look, in which anger congealed into something very like fear. She turned to me:

"If you insist on talking, come inside."

She took me into her little front room. The tea that Mrs. Broadhurst had spilled stained the rug like the old brown evidence of a crime.

Mrs. Snow stayed on her feet, and kept me standing.

"Where's Fritz?"

"My son is in his room."

"Can't he come out?"

"No, he can't. The doctor is coming to see him. I don't want you getting him all upset, the way you did yesterday."

"He was upset before I talked to him."

"I know that. But you made it worse. Frederick is weak in his feelings. He has been since he had his nervous breakdown. And I'm not going to let you send him back to the nursing home if I can help it."

I felt a twinge of shame, simply because she was small and female and indomitable. But she was standing in my way, and the lost boy was somewhere on the other side of her.

"Do you know Al Sweetner, Mrs. Snow?"

She compressed her lips, and shook her head. "I never heard of him." But the eyes behind her spectacles were watchful.

"Didn't Al come by your house last week?"

"He may have. I'm not home all the time. What was that name again?"

"Al Sweetner. He was killed last night. The Los Angeles police told me he escaped from Folsom Prison."

Her dark eyes brightened like a nocturnal animal's caught by a flashlight. "I see."

"Did you give him money, Mrs. Snow?"

"Not much. I gave him a five-dollar bill. I didn't know that he escaped from prison."

"Why did you give him money?"

"I felt sorry for him," she said.

"Was he a friend of yours?"

"I wouldn't say that. But he needed gas to get out of town, and I could spare him five dollars."

"I heard you gave him twenty."

She looked at me without wavering. "What if I did? I had no change. And I didn't want him hanging around until Frederick got home from work."

"Was he a friend of Frederick's?"

"I wouldn't call him a friend. Al was a friend to no one, including himself."

"But you knew him."

She sat down, stiffly upright, on the edge of the platform rocker. I sat on a chair nearby. Her face was closed and intent. She looked like a woman who had taken a deep breath and submerged herself.

"I'm not denying I knew him. He lived with us here in this house for a while when he was a boy. He was already in trouble, and the county was looking for a foster home. It was either that or the Preston Reformatory. Mr. Snow was still living then, and we agreed to take Albert into our home."

"That was generous of you."

She shook her head abruptly. "I don't claim that. We needed the money. We wanted to keep our home together, for Frederick, and Mr. Snow was ailing, and prices were sky-high in those days, too. Anyway, we took Albert in and did our best for him. But he was a hard case already—there wasn't much we could do to straighten him out. And he was a bad influence on Frederick. We were trying to make up our minds what to do when he solved the question for us. He stole a car and ran away with a girl."

"And Frederick was involved, wasn't he?"

She drew in a long breath like a diver coming up for air. "You've heard about it, have you?"

"Just a little."

"Then you probably heard it all wrong. A lot of people blamed Frederick for the whole thing, because he was the oldest. But Albert Sweetner was old beyond his years, and so was the girl. She was only fifteen or so but you can take my word for it, she was experienced. Frederick was easily led, like putty in their hands."

"Did you know the girl?"

"I knew her."

"What was her name?"

"Marty Nickerson. Her father was a construction man—when he worked. They lived in a motel at the end of this street. The way I got to know Marty, she used to help in the kitchen when Mr. and Mrs. Broadhurst had a party. I was keeping house for the Broadhursts at the time. Marty was a pretty little thing, but hard as nails. She was the real ringleader, if you want my opinion. And she was the one who got off scot-free, of course."

"Exactly what happened?"

"They stole a car, as I said. It must have been Marty's idea because they stole it from a man she knew—he owned the motel where she lived. Then the three of them ran off to Los Angeles. That was her idea, too—she wanted to be a movie actress and she was crazy to go and live in Los Angeles. They lasted three days and nights down there, sleeping in the car and scrounging for food. Then the three of them got caught trying to lift some goods from a day-old bakery shop."

She was talking with a kind of unconscious gusto, as if the adventure had been hers as well as her son's. The feeling became conscious, and she repressed it, forcing iron disapproval on her face.

"The worst of it was, Marty Nickerson turned up pregnant. She was underage, and Frederick admitted he had carnal knowledge of her and the judge and probation people gave him a hard choice. He could stand trial as an adult and take his chances on going to the pen. Or he could plead guilty in Juvenile Court and get probation with six months in forestry camp. The

lawyer said we shouldn't try to fight it—they bear down hard if you fight them in Juvenile Court—so Frederick went to forestry camp."

"What happened to the others?"

"Marty Nickerson got married. She married the man she stole the car from, and they never even took her into court."

"Where is she now?"

"I don't really know. The man had a business in the northern part of the county, and for all I know she's still living with him there."

"What's her married name?"

She considered the question. "I don't remember. I can find out if it's important. She sent Frederick a Christmas greeting the first year, which took some nerve on her part. I think he still has it in his keepsake drawer."

"What about Al?"

"Al is another story. It wasn't his first offense. He was already on probation, and they sent him to Preston until he was of age. I remember when he got out. It was fifteen years ago this past summer, and the jacarandas were starting to bloom. He came here to pick up his things. I'd kept them for him in a carton—some schoolbooks and a blue suit that the county had bought for him to go to church in. But the blue suit didn't fit him any more, and he wasn't interested in the books. I gave him a good meal and a little money."

She shook her head as if I had spoken. "It wasn't generosity on my part. I wanted to get rid of him before Frederick got mixed up with him again. Frederick was working for the Forest Service at that time, and I didn't want Albert interfering with his job. But it happened anyway."

"What happened?"

"Albert lost him his job and gave him a nervous breakdown into the bargain. I don't want to go into the gory details. What's past is past, and Albert didn't set foot on my doorstep again until he showed up last week. Now you tell me he's dead."

"He was murdered in Northridge last night. We don't know who did it, or why. But it might help if you tell me what happened fifteen years ago. How did Albert give Fritz a nervous breakdown?"

"By getting him in trouble. It's always the same old story."

"What was the trouble?"

"He took Frederick's tractor and went joyriding in the hills. But of course it wasn't Frederick's, and that was the point. The tractor was U.S. Government property, and Frederick could have been sent to federal prison along with Albert. As it was, they threw him out of his job, and it was all Albert's fault."

I was getting restless. "May I talk to Frederick, Mrs. Snow?"

"I don't see any point in it. I've told you everything you asked. And I can tell you anything he can tell you."

"But there may be things that you don't know and he does."

"I'm afraid you don't understand," she said with a faintly superior look. "Frederick and I are very close." But after a moment she said: "What sort of things do you mean?"

"I'd prefer to talk to him about it. You're his mother, and you're naturally defensive."

"I have to be. Frederick doesn't stand up for himself. Ever since he had his breakdown and lost his job with the Forest Service, he blames himself for everything. You should have heard him crying in his room after you cross-questioned him yesterday."

"He didn't say anything incriminating to me."

She gave me a skeptical look. "What *did* he say?"

"I don't think I should tell you. He's a grown man."

"You're wrong. He's a boy in a man's body. He's never been the same since he had his nervous breakdown."

"Which happened fifteen years ago, is that correct?"

"That's correct. It was the summer Captain Broadhurst went away."

"Was Frederick fond of the captain?"

"He worshiped the ground he walked on. Captain Broadhurst was like a father to him. He idolized the whole Broadhurst family. And it broke his heart when the captain ran off. It was like his own father dying on him all over again. I'm not making that up. Dr. Jerome said it himself."

"Is he the doctor who's coming to see Frederick?"

She nodded. "He should be here any time now."

"Is he a psychiatrist?"

"We don't believe in psychiatrists," she said flatly. "Dr. Jerome is a good doctor. He's Mrs. Broadhurst's doctor, which means he has to be good. When Frederick had his breakdown she got him Dr. Jerome and paid the bills, including the nursing home. And when he got out of that place she gave him a job herself, in her own garden." Mrs. Snow smiled dimly, sifting what cheer she could from the memory. "But now I'm afraid he's going to lose that job, too."

"I don't see why he should, if he's done nothing wrong. As a matter of fact, I don't understand why he lost his job with the Forest Service."

"Neither do I. Albert took the key to his 'dozer without his permission. But the district ranger didn't believe my son. It all goes back to what happened in Juvenile Court three years before. Once a boy gets into trouble, he's lost his good name for all future time."

chapter 22

MRS. SNOW GOT up and moved toward the door, as if she was expecting to let me out. Though the atmosphere of her home depressed me, I wasn't ready to leave yet. I stayed in my chair, and after a silent struggle she came back to the platform rocker and sat down again.

"Is there something else?" she said.

"You may be able to help me. This has nothing directly to do with you or Frederick. But I gather you were working for Mr. and Mrs. Broadhurst when Mr. Broadhurst took off."

"Yes I was."

"Did you happen to know the woman?"

"Ellen Kilpatrick? I certainly did. She taught art at the high school and was married to Kilpatrick the real estate man. That was before he struck it rich with Canyon Estates. He was still living from hand to mouth like the rest of us.

"Mrs. Kilpatrick saw a chance to better herself, I guess, and she set her net for Captain Broadhurst. I saw the whole thing happen. When Mrs. Broadhurst was away, the two of them used to leave Stanley with me and go up to the Mountain House. Mrs. Kilpatrick was supposed to be teaching the captain to paint pictures. But she was teaching him other things as well. They thought they were fooling everyone, but they weren't. I used to catch the looks between them sometimes, like they were off in a secret world by themselves and nobody else existed."

"Did Mrs. Broadhurst know about the affair?"

"She must have. I could see that she was suffering. But she never said a word, at least not within my hearing. I think she wanted to avoid a break. Her family stands for something in this town—at least they used to. And then there was poor little Stanley to consider. Sometimes when I

think back, I think an open break would have been better for Stanley in the long run. He used to ask me what his father and the woman were doing up there in the Mountain House. And I had to make up a story for him, but he was never entirely taken in. Children never are."

"This went on for some time, I gather."

"At least a year. It was a strange year, even for me. I was keeping house for Mrs. Broadhurst, and I was in it but not of it. After a while the two of them got careless in front of me. You'd think I was part of the furniture or something. Toward the end they didn't always bother to go to the Mountain House. One reason for that, Frederick was working on a Forest Service trail at the head of the canyon. So the two of them stayed around the house when Mrs. Broadhurst was out. They'd lock themselves in the den and come out fiery red in the face, and I'd have to make up stories for Stanley about why the couch was squeaking." Her face blushed faintly mauve under the powder. "I don't know why I'm telling you all this. I intended to go to my grave without telling anyone."

"Do you know what made them leave?"

"I guess the strain got to be too much for them. It was almost too much for me. I was just about ready to quit my job when they finally did take off."

"Where did they go?"

"They went to San Francisco, so I've heard, and neither one of them ever did come back here. I don't know what they lived on. He had no profession, and no money of his own. Knowing both of them, my guess would be that she got a job in the Bay area, and she's probably supporting him to this day. He isn't what you call a practical man."

"What kind of a woman is she?"

"The arty type, but a lot more practical than she ever let on. She pretended to have her head in the clouds, but her feet were made of clay. Sometimes I really felt sorry for her. She used to follow him with her eyes as if she was a dog and he was her master. I've often thought about it since—how a woman with a husband of her own and a little boy could feel like that for another woman's husband."

"I gather from his picture that he was a good-looking man."

"That's true. Where did you see his picture?"

I got out Stanley's advertisement and showed it to her. She gave it a look of recognition:

"This is the clipping Albert Sweetner had the other day. He wanted to make sure that the man was Captain Broadhurst. I told him it was."

"Did he ask about the woman?"

"He didn't have to. Albert knew Mrs. Kilpatrick from away back. She

was his home-room teacher at the high school when Albert was living in our home." She wiped her glasses and bent over the clipping again. "Who put this ad in the paper?"

"Stanley Broadhurst."

"Where would he get the cash for a thousand-dollar reward? He doesn't have one nickel to rub against another."

"From his mother. At least that was the idea."

"I see." Her eyes came up from the clipping, full of the past. "Poor little Stanley. He was still trying to find out what went on in the Mountain House."

The woman's insight continued to surprise me. Her mind had been sharpened by trouble, and exercised by years of defensive tactics on behalf of Fritz. I realized she'd been talking to me for a purpose, fending me off with stories like an aging Scheherazade, laying down a barrage of words between me and her son.

I looked at my watch. It was a quarter to one.

"Do you have to go?" Mrs. Snow said eagerly.

"If I could have a few minutes with Frederick first—"

"You can't. I won't permit it. He's always blaming himself for things he didn't do."

"I can make allowances for that."

She shook her head. "It's unfair of you to ask. I've told you a lot more than Frederick ever could." She added with a kind of angry bravado: "If there's anything more you want to know, ask me."

"There is one thing. You mentioned a Christmas card that Marty Nickerson sent Frederick."

"It wasn't a Christmas card, exactly—just a greeting on a postcard." She got up. "I think I can find it if you want to see it."

She went through the doorway into the kitchen. I heard a second door open and close, and then a mumble of talk through the thin walls. I could hear Frederick's voice rising hysterically, his mother's voice quieting him down.

She came out with a postcard which she handed me. The colored picture on the face of the card showed the front of a two-story motel whose sign said: "Yucca Tree Motor Inn." It had been postmarked in Petroleum City on December 22, 1952. The message was handwritten in faded green ink:

Dear Fritz,

Long time no see. How are things in good old Santa Teresa? I have a little girl, born December 15, just in time to be my Christmas baby. She weighs seven lbs., six oz., and she's a dolly. We decided to

call her Susan. I am very happy. Hoping you are the same. Christmas greetings to you and your mother.

Martha (Nickerson) Grandall

The phone rang in the kitchen. Mrs. Snow jumped as if an alarm had sounded. But she pulled the kitchen door shut behind her before she answered it.

A moment later she opened the door again. "It's Mr. Kelsey," she said, holding her mouth as if the name tasted bitter. "He wants to talk to you."

She stepped to one side to let me pass and stayed in the doorway to listen.

Kelsey's voice was urgent: "The *Ariadne*'s been sighted by one of the volunteer pilots in the sheriff's aero-squadron. She's grounded in Dunes Bay."

"What happened to the kids aboard her?"

"That isn't clear. But it doesn't sound too good. According to my information she's breaking up in the surf."

"Exactly where?"

"Just below the state park. Do you know the place?"

"Yes. Where are you? I can pick you up."

"I'm afraid I can't leave town right now. I have a lead in the Stanley Broadhurst killing. I shouldn't leave the fire area, anyway."

"What's the lead?"

"Your man with the long black wig was seen in the area yesterday. He was driving an old white car along Rattlesnake Road. A coed from the college was taking a walk there, and she saw him shortly before the fire started."

"Is it a positive identification?"

"Not yet. I'm going to talk to her now."

Kelsey hung up. Turning away from the phone, I noticed that the door of Fritz's room was ajar. One of his moist eyes appeared at the crack like the eye of a fish in an underwater crevice. His mother, at the other door, was watching him like a shark.

"How are you, Fritz?" I said.

"I feel just terrible."

He opened the door wider. In his rumpled pajamas he looked less like a man than an ill-kept boy. His mother said:

"Go back in your room and be quiet."

He shook his frowzy head. "I don't like it in there. I keep seeing things in there."

"What do you keep seeing, Fritz?" I said.

"I keep seeing Mr. Broadhurst in his grave."

"Did you bury him?" I said.

He nodded, and began to cry, nodding and crying like a human pump. His mother moved between us. Leaning her slight weight against his amorphous body, she pushed him back into his room.

She closed the door on him and locked it and turned on me, holding the key like a weapon. "Please get out of here now. You've got him all upset."

"If he buried Stanley Broadhurst yesterday, you can't very well hush it up. You're crazy to try."

She let out a kind of terrier noise which was meant to be a laugh. "I'm not the one that's crazy. He no more buried Mr. Broadhurst than I did. You people have got him so confused and frightened that he doesn't know what he did or what he saw. Except that I know for a fact he didn't do anything wrong. I know my son."

She spoke with such assurance that I almost believed her. "I still think he knows more than he told us."

"He knows a good deal less, you mean. He doesn't know what he knows. And I should think you'd be ashamed of yourself, badgering a widow and her only son. If the doctor finds him in this condition, he'll want to commit him to the State Hospital."

"Has he been committed before?"

"He nearly was, years ago. But Mrs. Broadhurst said she'd pay for the nursing home."

"This was in 1955?"

"Yes. Now will you please get out of my kitchen? I didn't invite you in here, but I'm inviting you out."

I thanked her, and left the house. At the curb in front of it, a middle-aged man in sports clothes was climbing out of a yellow sports car. He lifted a medical bag out of the boot and came toward me. His gray hair and light blue eyes were in contrast to his high color.

"Dr. Jerome?"

"Yes." His look was inquiring.

I told him who I was and what I was doing. "Mrs. Stanley Broadhurst hired me. How is Elizabeth Broadhurst, by the way?"

"She's suffering from exhaustion, which brought on a mild heart attack."

"Is she talkable?"

"Not today. Possibly tomorrow. But I'd stay off the subject of her son—and her grandson." The doctor took a deep breath and sighed with unexpected feeling. "I just had a look at Stanley's body in the morgue. I hate to see a young man die."

"Was it the stab wound that killed him?"

"I would say so."

"Were you his doctor?"

"I was for most of his life—as long as he lived at home. And I still saw him from time to time. He liked to check in with me when he had a problem."

"What sort of problems did he have?"

"Emotional problems. Marital problems. I really can't discuss them with a third party."

"You can't hurt Stanley. He's dead."

"I'm aware of that," the doctor said with some asperity. "The problem I'm interested in is who stabbed him to death and buried him."

"Your patient Fritz Snow says he buried him."

I watched the doctor for his reaction. His bland eyes didn't shift. His high hard color remained unchanged. He even smiled a little.

"Don't believe him. Fritz is always confessing something."

"How do you know it isn't true?"

"Because he's been my patient for over twenty years."

"Is he insane?"

"I wouldn't put it that way. He's hypersensitive, and he tends to blame himself for everything. When he gets emotionally upset, he loses all sense of reality. Poor Fritz has been a frightened boy all his life."

"What's he frightened of?"

"His mother, among other things."

"So am I."

"So are we all," the doctor said with a glint of amusement. "She's a powerful little woman. But she probably got that way because she had to. Her late husband was very much like Fritz. He had a hard time holding any job. I suppose their basic trouble was genetic, and there's still not much we can do about heredity."

We both glanced toward the house. Mrs. Snow was monitoring us from the front window. She let the curtain fall back into place.

"I really have to get in to see my patient," Jerome said.

"Perhaps we can have a talk about him some time when you're free. Whether or not Fritz is innocent, as you say, he has been connected with the main suspect in Stanley's death." I told him about Al Sweetner, and Kelsey's new lead. "And we know Fritz had access to the tools that were used to dig Stanley's grave. On top of that, he told me that he buried him."

The doctor shook his gray head slowly from side to side. "If the sky fell, Fritz would find a way to blame himself. As a matter of fact, there's a pretty good possibility that Stanley dug his own grave."

"The deputy coroner and I were speculating about that possibility."

"This isn't entirely speculation on my part," Jerome said. "When I examined Stanley's body just now, I noticed blisters on his hands."

"What kind of blisters?"

"Ordinary water blisters, on the insides of both hands." He touched the palm of his left hand with the wide spatulate fingers of his right. "The kind of blisters a man gets from digging he isn't used to. I admit it's hard to understand why a man would dig his own grave."

"He may have been forced to do it." I said. "Al Sweetner, the man in the wig, was a hard case when he was alive. It's possible he stood over Stanley with a gun. Or Stanley may have had some other compelling reason."

"What reason?"

"I don't know. He may have intended to bury somebody else. He had a young girl with him, as well as his son."

"What happened to them?"

"I'm on my way to find out."

chapter 23

DUNES BAY WAS at the end of a winding county road off Highway 1. Above the wind-carved hills of sand which rose northward along the shore, clouds were streaming inland like torn pennants. It looked as if a storm was on the way.

The kiosk at the entrance to the state park was closed and empty. I drove on through to the parking lot which overlooked the ocean. About three hundred feet out, where the waves were breaking, the white sloop lay on her side. Further out a flock of pelicans circled and dived for fish.

Three people were watching *Ariadne* from the beach. They weren't the three that I was looking for. One was a man in a state park uniform. Near him but not with him, a couple of boys with long sun-faded hair leaned on their surfboards.

I got my binoculars out of the trunk of my car and focused them on the sloop. She was dismasted, and her rigging hung overside like a torn net. Her hull appeared to be sprung and heavy with water. She rose up sluggishly when the long surge lifted her, then fell back clumsily on her side. My breathing labored as if in empathy.

I went down to the beach on a wooden walkway half drifted over with sand. The state park man turned to meet me, and I asked him if the young people had been rescued.

"Yessir. They got ashore."

"All three of them?"

"Yessir. These boys here were a great help."

Following his gesture, I looked at the two surfers. They returned my look with a kind of wary pride, as if they distrusted any possible adult approval.

"They're okay," the older one said. They nodded their heads in solemn unison.

"Where are they now?"

He shrugged his limber shoulders. "Somebody came and picked them up in a station wagon."

"What kind of a station wagon?"

He pointed toward the park official. "Ask him."

I turned to the man, who looked like somebody's son-in-law. He answered me uncomfortably: "It was a blue Chevy wagon, recent model. I didn't get the license number. I had no reason to. I didn't know at the time that they were fugitives."

"The little boy isn't a fugitive. He may be a kidnaping victim."

"He didn't act like one."

"How did he act?"

"Scared. But not scared of them particularly. He went along with them without any trouble."

"Where did they take him?"

"To the station wagon."

"I know that. Who was driving it?"

"A big woman in a wide-brimmed hat."

"How did she know they were here?"

"I let the blond girl use my phone. I had no way of knowing that they—"

"Can you trace the call?"

"I don't see how, unless it was long-distance. I'll give it a try, though."

He plodded toward the walkway, shielding his face against the blowing sand. I followed him up the entrance kiosk and waited while he used the phone inside it. He came out shaking his head, with his hands spread loosely.

"They don't seem to have any record of the call."

"Have you talked to the police?"

"They came and went. The sheriff's captain came out from Petroleum City. But that was after the three of them took off in the Chevy wagon."

I went back down to the blundering edge of the sea and took another long look at *Ariadne*. She flopped in the surge like a bird made helpless by oil. When I turned away, I saw that the older of the two boy surfers had come up quietly behind me.

"I hate to see it happen to a boat. It gives me bad vibes."

"What did happen?"

"The motor conked out, he said. Before he could get the sails set, the

wind blew her in and grounded her. The mast went overboard when she hit. My brother and me saw it happen. We went out on our boards and brought them in."

"Was anybody hurt?"

"*He* was. He hurt his arm when the rigging went."

"What about the little boy?"

"He's okay. He got cold, so my brother gave him his blanket. The poor little guy was shivering like he couldn't stop—I mean it." The boy was shaking with the cold himself, but maintaining a stoical expression, like a primitive youth enduring an initiation rite.

"Where did they go from here?"

He gave me another wary look. "Are you a nark, or what?"

"I'm a private detective. I'm trying to get the boy back."

"The big one with the whiskers?"

"The little one."

"When you said it was a kidnaping, were you telling it like it is?"

"Yes."

"Aren't they brother and sister? They said they were."

"What else did they say?"

"The one with the whiskers said that you—that they were after him for shooting speed. Is that right?"

"No, it isn't. I want the boy back. His father was murdered yesterday."

"By the head with the whiskers?"

"It could be. I don't know."

The boy went and talked to his brother, and started back toward me. I met him halfway:

"What's the secret?"

"I was just checking with my brother. The girl told him he could pick up his blanket in Petroleum City. She said she'd leave it for him at the office of the Yucca Tree Inn."

I went there, passing through pastures full of oil pumps and fields of derricks. Further off on the horizon stood the gantries of Vandenberg Air Force Base. Petroleum City was a country town which had grown up suddenly. It had spilled beyond its limits into miles of quick housing developments congealing in a glacier of sameness.

The Yucca Tree Inn had grown since its postcard picture was taken fifteen years ago. It was built around three sides of a short block at the southern edge of the city, with a convention center on the fourth side. The movable lettering on the marquee in front offered "Steak, Lobster and Continuous Entertainment." When I parked in front of the office, I could hear western music like the last wail of a dying frontier.

The woman behind the desk was dressed like a synthetic cowgirl in a brightly striped blouse and a western hat with an imitation rawhide band. She had a big friendly body which looked as if it didn't quite know what to do with itself, even after years of practice.

"Did somebody leave a blanket with you?" I said. "A wet blanket?"

She gave me an unsmiling look. "You aren't the one that lent Susie the blanket."

"I didn't say I was. Is Susie here?"

"No. They took off again." She paused with her lips parted, as if she'd been overtaken by sudden doubt. "I'm not supposed to be talking about it, though."

"Who said so?"

"Mr. Crandall."

"Lester Crandall?"

"Yessir. He owns this place."

"Where is he? I'd like to talk to him."

"What about?"

"His daughter. I'm a detective—a private one. I was at his house in Pacific Palisades last night, and he and I are cooperating."

"He isn't here."

"You said he gave you orders not to talk."

"On the phone. I talked to him on the phone."

"When was this?"

"A couple of hours ago. As soon as Susie called me from Dunes Bay. Mr. Crandall told me to keep her here until he arrived. That's easier said than done, though. The minute my back was turned, the three of them piled into the station wagon and took off again."

"Which way?"

"San Francisco." She moved her thumb like a hitchhiker in that direction.

I got the license number of the station wagon from her. "Did you tell the police?"

"Why should I? It's her father's car. Anyway, Mr. Crandall told me to keep the police out of it."

"When do you expect Mr. Crandall?"

"Any time now." She looked as if she wasn't looking forward to the meeting. "If you have any pull with him, do me a favor, will you? Tell him I did my best, but she got away from me."

"All right. What's your name? Mine is Lew Archer."

"Joy Rawlins." She said with the air of repeating an old joke: "I'm thinking seriously of changing it to Sorrow."

"Don't do that. Can I buy you a drink?"

"Sorry, I can't leave the desk. But thanks for the offer." She gave me a smile which gradually faded. "What goes on with Susie, anyway? She used to be a nice quiet young girl, almost too quiet."

"She isn't any more. She's on the run."

"Then why did she phone here?"

"Maybe because she needed transportation. What did she say to you when she called from the beach?"

"She said she was out for a sail, and her boat was wrecked, and she and her friends were soaking wet. She asked me not to call her father but of course I had to—he left specific orders. I brought them back here and they changed into dry clothes and had a bite—"

"Where did they get the dry clothes?"

"From the owner's suite. I opened it up for them. I thought they were staying—in fact the boy with the beard asked me about getting a doctor for his arm. He had what looked like a broken arm—hanging loose, you know? But then he changed his mind and said he'd wait until he saw his mother. I asked him where his mother was, but I didn't get an answer out of him."

"What about the little boy?"

"I have a boy of my own, and I fixed him up with some clothes."

"Did he say anything?"

"I don't think he said a word." She considered the question. "No, he didn't speak within my hearing."

"Did he cry?"

She shook her head. "No. He wasn't crying."

"Did he eat?"

"I got him to eat some soup and part of a hamburger. But most of the time he just sat like a little image." She was silent and then said as if at random: "Did you see the pelicans at Dunes Bay? They can't have any more young ones, did you know that? Their bodies are poisoned with DDT, and it makes their eggs all break."

I told her that I knew about the pelicans. "What about Susan? Did she do any talking?"

"Very little. I don't know what to make of that girl. She's changed."

"In what way?"

"Susie and I used to be pretty good friends before they moved down south. At least I thought so."

"How long ago did they move?"

"It's been a couple of years now. Les—Mr. Crandall opened a new motel in Oceano, and Los Angeles was more central for him. At least that was the reason he gave."

"Were there other reasons?"

The woman gave me a quizzical look, both friendly and suspicious. "You're pumping me, aren't you? And I'm talking too much. But I hate to see Susie kick over the traces like this. She used to be a real good girl – I mean it. Headstrong like her father, but good at heart."

She went into deep thought for a minute. Her face, forgetful of me, dreamed downward as if she had a child at her breast. I prompted her:

"What changed her?"

"She seems kind of desperate to me. I don't know why." She grimaced. "I *do* know why, really. They moved to L.A. to give her more advantages—social advantages and stuff like that. It was her mother's idea, really—she's always been hipped on L.A. It didn't work out for Susie, or for them, either. So of course they're blaming her for not being happy, and she has no one to turn to. She's a very lonely girl, and that's murder."

I winced at the word, but I found something hopeful to say. "She turned to you."

"But then she turned around and went away again."

"You care about Susan."

"Yes I do. I never had a daughter."

chapter 24

I HADN'T EATEN for seven or eight hours. I went into the restaurant-bar from which the music emanated and hung my hat on the brass-studded tip of a mounted longhorn.

While my steak was being grilled, I shut myself up in a phone booth and put in another call to Willie Mackey.

Willie answered the phone himself. "Mackey Services."

"This is Archer. Have you put your finger on Ellen?"

"Not yet, but I've traced the dog."

"The dog?"

"The Great Dane," Willie said impatiently. "He was lost all right. I've been in touch with the owner, who lives outside Mill Valley. He advertised for his dog last week, and somebody found it in Sausalito. That's a long way from the Peninsula, Lew."

"My informant was an acid freak, I think."

"I was wondering," Willie said. "Anyway, I have a man over in Sausalito now. You know Harold."

"Can you contact him?"

"I should be able to. He has one of the radio cars."

"Tell him to watch for a blue Chevy station wagon with three young people in it." I gave him their names and descriptions, and the license number of the car.

"What is Harold supposed to do if he sees them?"

"Stay with them. Get the little boy, if he can do it without endangering him."

"I better get over to Marin County myself," Willie said. "You didn't tell me this was a snatch."

"It isn't an ordinary one."

"Then what are these people up to?"

I had no ready answer. After a moment I said:

"The little boy's father was murdered yesterday. He was probably a witness to the killing."

"The other two did it?"

"I don't know." I felt a growing ambivalence about Susan and Jerry—I wanted to end their wild flight, not only for the child's sake but for their own. "We have to go on that assumption, though."

I went back into the restaurant. My steak was ready, and I washed it down with draft beer. Behind the semi-elliptical bar four cowboys who had never been near a cow sang western songs which sounded as if they had originated in the far east.

I ordered a second beer and looked around the place. It was a noisy mixture of the real west and the imitation west. The mixture included cowboys both dude and actual, off-duty servicemen with their wives and girls, tourists, oil-workers wearing high-heeled boots like the cowboys, a few men in business suits with wide ties and narrow sun-crinkled eyes.

Some of the eyes seemed to brighten like electronic sensors when Lester Crandall came in from the lobby. Electronic money sensors. He paused in the doorway, looking around the room. I raised my hand. He came over and shook it.

"You're Archer, aren't you? How did you get here so fast?"

I told him, watching his face as I talked. His reactions seemed dull and sluggish, as if he hadn't slept the night before. Still he seemed more at home in his motor inn than in his big house in the Palisades.

The waitresses had sprung to attention when he entered, and one of them came to the table:

"Can I get you anything, Mr. Crandall?"

"Bourbon. You know my brand. And hold Mr. Archer's check."

"That isn't necessary," I said. "But thanks."

"My pleasure." He bent forward, regarding me through puffed eyelids. "If you've told me and I've forgotten, please excuse me. I'm a little slow today. It still isn't clear to me what your interest is."

"I'm working for Mrs Stanley Broadhurst. I'm trying to get her boy back before he's hurt and before she goes off the deep end."

"I'm pretty close to the deep end myself." He took hold of my wrist with his work-scarred hand in a sudden gesture of intimacy. Just as suddenly, he let go. "But let me set your mind at rest about one thing. My Susan isn't the kind of girl who would hurt a little boy."

"Perhaps not intentionally. But she's exposing him to danger. It's a wonder he wasn't drowned today."

"That's what Mrs. Rawlins said. I wish she'd had the intestinal fortitude to keep them here. She said she would."

"It wasn't her fault she couldn't. Didn't you tell her not to call in the police?"

Crandall gave me a look of unguarded cold anger. "I know the police in this part of the world. I was born and brought up here. They shoot first and ask questions afterwards. I'm not turning them loose on my young daughter."

I couldn't help agreeing with him. "We won't argue. Anyway, they're well on their way to the Bay area by now."

"Where in the Bay area?"

"Probably Sausalito."

He clenched his fists and shook them as if he had dice in both hands. "Why aren't you after them?"

"I thought you might say something useful."

His eyes were still stained with anger. "Is that a crack?"

"It's the truth. Why don't you calm down? A friend of mine in San Francisco will be looking out for them."

"A friend of yours?"

"A private detective named Willie Mackey."

"What's he going to do with them if he catches them?"

"Use his good judgment. Take the boy away from them if he can."

"That sounds dangerous to me. What about my daughter?"

"It's a dangerous life she's chosen."

"Don't give me that. I want her protected, you understand?"

"Then protect her."

He gave me a dreary look. The waitress came running with his drink, smiling desperately in an effort to counteract the boss's mood. The drink was more effective than her smile. It heightened his color and made his eyes glisten with moisture. Even his sideburns seemed to take on a bristling new life of their own.

"It's not my fault," he said. "I gave her everything a girl could want. It's Jerry Kilpatrick's fault. He took an innocent girl and corrupted her."

"Somebody did."

"You mean it wasn't him?"

"I mean he wasn't the only one. One day last week—I think it was probably Thursday—she paid a visit to the Star Motel."

"The one on the coast highway? Susie wouldn't go there."

"She was seen there. She spent some time with an escaped convict named Albert Sweetner. Does the name mean anything to you?"

"No, it doesn't, and neither does the rest of your story. I just plain don't believe it." But his face was adjusting to it like an old fighter's who

had taken a lot of punishment and expected to have to take more. "Why are you telling me this?"

"You need to do some thinking, and a man can't think without the facts. Al Sweetner was murdered Saturday night."

"And you're accusing Susan?"

"No. She was probably out at sea when it happened. I'm trying to get across to you the kind of trouble she's in."

"I know she's in bad trouble." He rested his folded arms on the table and looked at me over them like a man behind a barricade. "What can I do to get her out of it? I've been running around in circles since she left home. But she keeps on moving away out of my reach."

He was silent for a minute. His gaze moved past me and grew distant as if he was watching his daughter slip away over a receding horizon. I had no children, but I had given up envying people who had.

"Have you any idea what she's running from?"

He shook his head. "We gave her everything. I thought she was okay. But something happened—I don't know what."

He moved his head obtusely from side to side, groping for his daughter in a kind of blind man's buff. It filled me with a tedious sorrow, perhaps not unlike his own.

I pushed back my chair and stood up. "Thanks for the steak."

Crandall stood up facing me, shorter, wider, older, sadder, richer.

"Where are you going, Mr. Archer?"

"Sausalito."

"Take Mother and I with you."

"Mother?"

"Mrs. Crandall." He was one of those men who seldom referred to their wives by their Christian names.

"I didn't know you had her along."

"She's freshening up in the suite. But we can be ready to leave at a moment's notice. I'll pay all expenses. In fact," he added, "let's not beat around the bush—I want to buy your services."

"I already have a client. But I'd like to talk to Mrs. Crandall."

"Of course. Why not?"

I put down a dollar tip. Crandall picked up the bill, rolled it carefully, and, rising on his toes, tucked it into my outside breast pocket.

"Your money is no good in my place."

"This is for the waitress."

I unrolled the dollar bill and put it back on the table. Crandall started to get angry, and then decided not to let himself. He wanted me to take Mother and him along.

chapter 25

I ACCOMPANIED HIM into the lobby and waited while he went upstairs to his suite. Joy Rawlins was behind the desk, taking things out of a drawer and putting them into a leatherette case. She was heavy-eyed and sallow as if she had suffered a loss of blood.

"He fired me," she said in a flat voice. "He gave me fifteen minutes to get out. And I've been here more than fifteen years. I built this place up for him."

"I'm sure he'll reconsider."

"You don't know Les. He's been getting awfully high and mighty since he started to make real money. He's got a God complex, and it's growing on him. It was just his good luck that his daddy's ranch was between Petro City and Vandenberg AFB. But Les thinks that he did it all himself. And now he thinks he can wipe other people out like that." She made a slicing motion with her hand. Her hand was trembling. "I *need* this job. I've got a boy in school."

"What reason did he give for firing you?"

"No reason. But you know why and so do I. I was supposed to hog-tie Susie or something. He puts the blame on me because he hasn't the guts to put it where it belongs—on him and his wife. They were the ones that brought her up. I could tell you things about Susie's mother—"

Her face froze in a look of surprise, as if she had heard herself. She stopped talking. I tried to get her started again:

"What's Mrs. Crandall's background, anyway?"

"Nothing much. Her father was in the construction trades—dry-wall installation—and they batted around the state when she was a kid. She was still no more than a kid when she married Lester. He plucked her right out of high school. He was already a middle-aged man."

"I noticed the difference in ages. And I wondered why she married him."

"She had to."

"You mean she was pregnant? That's common enough."

"There was more to it than that—a good deal more. She was running with a wild gang from Santa Teresa, and they stole Les's car. She could have gone to jail if he had wanted to prosecute. One of the others did."

"Albert Sweetner?"

Her face closed. "You've been putting me on. You already know all this."

"Not all of it. But I ran into Sweetner yesterday. How did you happen to know him?"

"I didn't, really. Only he came here last week. I've got a good memory for faces, and I remembered him from the other time. He wanted to know where to find her."

"Find Mrs. Crandall?"

"Both the Crandalls."

"And you told him?"

"No, I didn't. But their address is no secret. It's in the L.A. phone directory." She added virtuously: "I didn't even tell him that."

"You mentioned another time that he came here."

Her eyes shifted to longer focus. "It was a long time ago, when he was just a young guy hitching through. I wasn't so old myself then."

"How long ago?"

"Let's see, I was pretty new on the job. And Susan was just about three. It must have been fifteen years, at least." She grimaced. "I should have stood at home this week. Whenever that man passes through, he stirs up trouble."

"What did he stir up fifteen years ago?"

"I don't know exactly. He wanted to talk to Les—I figured he was hitting him for a loan. But after he left, all hell broke loose around here. Les and his wife had a knock-down drag-out fight."

"What was the fight about?"

"I don't know—all I heard was the shouting. You'll have to take it up with them yourself. Only don't quote me. I've got to ask the son-of-a-gun for references."

Crandall called me from the top of the stairs. I went up, lifted by a certain excitement. I was eager for a second look at Martha Crandall, against the background I had been filling in.

The suite was furnished in cheap luxury. She was sitting in an overstuffed chair with her legs crossed in front of her and thick new makeup on her face.

I was struck again by the beauty and grace of her body. No matter how she placed herself, it seemed to organize the room around her, as a light or a fire does. But her eyes were strained and cold. They looked at me through her mask of makeup as if she had had a bad night and I had been responsible for it.

She gave me her hand and held on as she said: "You've got to get Susie back for me. She's been gone for three days now and I can't stand it."

"I'm doing my best."

"Lester says she's on her way to Sausalito. Is that right?"

"It's a fairly good possibility. Anyway, I'm acting on it. You may be able to help me."

"How?" She leaned toward me in an eager posture, but her eyes didn't change. They seemed jaded, as if she was watching her life repeat itself. "I'll do anything I can, I mean it." Her voice was rougher, taking on the accent of her surroundings.

"Do you know Ellen Kilpatrick?"

Her glance caromed off her husband, and came back to me. "It's strange you should ask me that. I was thinking of calling her."

"Why?"

"She lives in Sausalito."

"Under what name?"

"Ellen Storm. She's an artist, she uses that name."

"She calls herself an artist," Crandall said. "But she's a phony. She can't even draw."

His voice was choked, and his face reddened. I wondered if he had reason to be angry with Ellen, or if he had simply attached his general anger to her.

"Have you seen her work?" I said.

"I've seen a sample of it. She wrote us a letter in the summer offering to sell us a painting. So I sent her some money, and she sent back this painting."

"Do you have it here?"

"I chucked it out. It was just a piece of junk — an excuse to ask me for money."

"It was not," his wife said. "She said she wanted to give us first chance."

"Nobody was standing in line."

I turned to her. "Have you seen Ellen recently?"

She glanced nervously at her husband. "She was my homeroom teacher. Isn't that right, Les?"

He didn't answer her. He seemed to be absorbed in his own glum thoughts.

"And she's Jerry Kilpatrick's mother," I said. "Did you know that?"

"No." She looked at her husband again and added after an embarrassed pause: "Not until I figured it out, I mean."

Crandall moved between his wife and me, standing over her like a prosecutor. "Did you invite Jerry Kilpatrick to the house?"

"What if I did? It was a nice thing to do."

"It was a lousy thing to do. You can see what's come of it. Who put you up to it? Did she?"

"It's none of your business. And don't loom over me like that."

Intent on their intramural game, they seemed to have forgotten me. Partly to break it up and partly because the question needed asking, I said to her:

"Was Albert Sweetner in your home room in high school?"

She sat very still and quiet for a time. Her husband was quiet, too, his eyes rather absent-looking as if he had been sandbagged by the past.

"It was a big class," she said. "What was that name again?"

"Albert Sweetner."

She uncrossed and recrossed her legs like soft and elegant scissors and looked up at her husband. "Don't stare at me like that. How can I think with you staring at me?"

"I'm not staring." He tried to remove his gaze from her, and couldn't.

"Why don't you go and have a drink?" she said. "I forget how to talk with you standing there staring."

He put out his hand. Without quite touching her, it traced the contour of her head. "Take it easy now, Mother. We've got to stick together—you and me against the world."

"Sure. Only give me a chance to think for a minute, will you? Go have a drink."

He left the room slowly. I waited until I heard the click of the latch behind him, and his reluctant footsteps going downstairs.

"What are you trying to do?" the woman said. "Break up my marriage?"

"It seems to be slightly bent already."

"That isn't true. I've been a good wife to Lester, and he knows it. I've done my best to make up for any harm I did him in the past."

"Such as stealing his car?"

"That was nearly twenty years ago. You've got your nerve raking it up, and throwing Albert Sweetner in my face."

"I brought him up last night. Remember? You said you didn't know him."

"All you gave me was his first name. And I haven't even seen him since high school."

"Are you sure, Mrs. Crandall? He came here to your motor inn fifteen years ago."

"A lot of people come to this place."

"And just this week he took your daughter to another motel."

She pushed the idea back with her hands. "Susan wouldn't go with a man like that."

"I'm afraid she did."

She stood up in agitation. "What was he trying to do? Get back at me for turning him in?"

"You turned him in?"

"I had to. It was that or go to Juvenile Hall. But that was before Susie was even born."

"Al wouldn't forget it, though."

"No. He wouldn't forget it. He came here fifteen years ago like you said, to try and break up my marriage. That was right after he got out of Preston."

"How did he try to break up your marriage?"

"He told my husband a lot of lies about me. I don't want to go into what he said. In fact, I don't know why I'm talking to you at all."

"Al Sweetner was murdered last night."

She looked at me in silence. Her eyes were frightened. Her body kept its feline confidence.

"I see. You think I killed him."

I neither affirmed nor denied this. Her look grew chillier: "Susan? You think it was Susan?"

"She isn't a suspect. I don't have a logical suspect."

"Then why did you throw it at me like that?"

"It's something I thought you ought to know."

"Thanks very much," she said bitterly. "What was Al doing with my daughter, anyway?"

"Mainly, I think, he was trying to use her as a source of information. Al was on the run, and he came south looking for money. He was trying to finance a trip to Mexico."

"Came south from where?"

"Sacramento. I think he stopped in Sausalito on the way."

She stood in a listening attitude, like a woman hearing footsteps in a graveyard. "Did Ellen point him in our direction?"

"I don't know what she did. But I'm reasonably certain he went to see her before he came south. He was after a reward which Stanley Broadhurst offered for her and his father."

"What kind of a reward?"

"A thousand dollars cash. Al probably hoped to get more." I pro-

duced my clipping of the ad, which was gradually wearing out. "This *is* Ellen, isn't it?"

"Yes. That's the way she used to look when she was teaching high school in Santa Teresa."

"Have you seen her since those days?"

She was slow in answering the question. "I went to see her last month after we bought that picture from her. Please don't mention this to Les—he doesn't know about it. We were in San Francisco for the weekend, and I got away from him and drove across the bridge to Sausalito." She added after a moment's hesitation: "I took Susie with me."

"Why?"

"I don't know—it seemed like a good idea. Ellen seemed to want to get in touch with me, and she did a lot for me when I was a young girl. If it wasn't for her I wouldn't even have lived all the way through my teens. And Susan was starting to show the same signs. She wasn't ever a happy girl, but she was starting to get desperate. You know?"

I didn't know, and said so. It was her first admission that something had been seriously wrong in Susan's life.

"She was scared of other people, really scared, the way I used to be when I was a kid. And they were scared of her in a way—the other kids couldn't figure what was bugging her. I knew, or I thought I knew, but I couldn't talk about it."

"Can you talk about it now?"

"I might as well. The whole thing's going to pieces anyway." She looked around the stuffy ornate room as if earthquake cracks were widening in the walls. "Les isn't Susie's father. He's done his best to be a father to her, but it just didn't get through to her. And I've felt funny about it, too—kind of embarrassed, you know? We've been sitting around like ninnies in our own house."

"Who is Susan's father?"

"It's none of your business." She regarded me levelly, without much heat. "It could be I don't even know the answer to that. My life was pretty much of a mess at one time. That was when I was younger than Susan is now."

"Was Fritz Snow her father?"

The woman's eyes grew sharper. "I'm not answering any questions on that subject, so forget it. Anyway, you're interrupting what I started out to tell you. I was worried about Susan, like I said, and I thought maybe Ellen would have some suggestions."

"Did she?"

"Not really. She did a lot of talking, and Susan did a lot of listening. But I didn't think too much of her ideas. She thought we should send

Susan away and let other people look after her. Or turn her loose and let her look after herself. But you can't do that. Young people need protection in this world."

"What did Susan think about it?"

"She wanted to stay with Ellen. But it wouldn't have been a good idea at all. Ellen's changed since she was young. She lives in that creepy old house in the woods like some kind of a hermit."

"No men?"

"Not that I saw. If you mean Leo Broadhurst, he's long gone. The two of them didn't stick together. It was one of those love affairs that only lasted as long as the wife was there to keep it hot." She looked a little embarrassed by her knowledge.

"Where did he go?"

"Out of the country, she said."

"You knew Leo before he left Santa Teresa, right?"

"I worked in his house, if you call that knowing him."

"What kind of a man was he?"

"He was the kind of man that couldn't keep his hands off women."

She spoke with a certain rancor, and I said: "Did he ever make a pass at you?"

"Once. I hit him in his pretty face." She looked at me defiantly, as if I had made a pass at her myself. "He kept his hot little hands to himself after that."

Remembered anger surged up in her, and made her rosy. Perhaps it was tinged with some other passion. She was a more complex woman than had appeared at first meeting.

But I was eager to be on my way. I went downstairs and called Willie Mackey again. While I waited on the line, he looked up Ellen Storm in a Marin directory. She lived in a house on Haven Road on the outskirts of Sausalito. Willie said he would have her house watched until I got there.

I slipped out to my car without saying goodbye to either of the Crandalls. I didn't want to have to take them along, with all the years of their lives dragging behind them.

chapter 26

WHEN I GOT to San Francisco it was dark, and it had been raining. Out at sea beyond the Golden Gate a mass of clouds was moving in from the Farallon Islands. The offshore wind blowing across the bridge felt wet and cold on my face.

A rectangular yellow sign at the entrance to Haven Road said that it was "Not a Through Street." I turned my car around and parked it, and continued on foot along the pitted asphalt. The scattered houses were hidden from the road, but I could see their lights shining through the trees.

A voice spoke softly from the darkness. "Lew?"

Willie Mackey appeared at the side of the road. He was wearing a dark raincoat, and his mustached face looked disembodied, like something called up at a seance. I moved in under the dripping trees with him and shook his gloved hand.

"They haven't shown," he said. "How hard is your information?"

"Just medium." The hope that brought me north had turned over in my chest and was sinking heavily toward my stomach. "Is the Storm woman at home?"

"She's there, but there's nobody with her."

"Do you know that?"

"Yep. Harold can see her through the side window."

"What's she doing?"

"Nothing much. Last time I checked with Harold, he said she seemed to be waiting."

"I think I'll go in and talk to her."

Willie took hold of my arm, pinching the muscle just above the elbow. "Is that a good idea, Lew?"

"She may have heard from them. She's the older boy's mother."

"All right, don't let me stop you." Willie released my arm and stepped aside.

I made my way up the washed-out gravel drive. The twin conical towers standing up against the night sky made the house look like something out of a medieval romance.

The illusion faded as I got nearer. There was a multicolored fanlight over the front door, with segments of glass fallen out, like missing teeth in an old smile. The veranda steps were half broken down and groaned under my weight. The door creaked open when I knocked.

Ellen appeared in the lighted hallway. Her mouth and eyes hadn't changed very much since her picture was taken all those years before, and it made the gray in her hair seem accidental. She was wearing a dress with a long-sleeved jersey top and a long full skirt on which there were paint stains in all three primary colors. Her body moved with unconscious pride.

She looked both eager and fearful as she came to the door. "Who are you?"

"My name is Lew Archer. The door blew open when I knocked."

"The latch needs fixing." She jiggled the knob. "You're the detective, aren't you?"

"You're well informed."

"Martha Crandall called me. She said you're looking for her daughter."

"Has Susan been here?"

"Not yet, but Martha spoke as if she intended to come." The woman looked out past me into the darkness. "She said my son Jerry is traveling with her."

"Right. And they have Leo Broadhurst's grandson with them."

She seemed puzzled. "How could Leo have a grandson?"

"He left a son behind him, remember. The son had a son. Ronny's six years old, and he's why I'm here."

"What are they doing with a six-year-old?"

"I don't know exactly. I was hoping to ask them."

"I see. Won't you please come in." She gestured with a kind of awkward grace, and her breast lifted. "We can wait together."

"You're very kind, Mrs. Kilpatrick."

The name displeased her, as if I'd brought it up to remind her of the past. She corrected me: "Miss Storm. I took it originally as a professional name. But I haven't used any other name for years."

"I understand you're a painter."

"Not a good one. But I work at it."

She took me into a large, high-ceilinged room. The walls were hung with canvases. Most of them were unframed, and their whorls and splotches of color looked unfinished, perhaps unfinishable.

The windows of the room were heavily draped, except for a triple window in an embrasure. Through the trees outside I could see the lights of Sausalito scattered down the hillside.

"Nice view," I said. "Do you mind if I draw the curtains?"

"Please do. Do you suppose they're out there watching me?"

I looked at her, and saw that she was serious. "Who do you mean?"

"Jerry and Susan and the little boy."

"It isn't likely."

"I know it isn't. But I've been feeling watched, tonight. Drawing the curtains doesn't really help. Whatever it is out there has X-ray eyes. Call it God, or call it the Devil. It hardly matters."

I turned from the window and looked at her face again. It had a certain nakedness, unused to the pressure of eyes.

"I've been keeping you standing, Mr. Archer. Won't you sit down?" She indicated a heavy old perpendicular chair.

"I'd rather sit in another room where we're not so visible."

"So would I, really."

She led me through the front hallway into a kind of office under the stairs, so small it was claustrophobic. The slanting ceiling at its highest part was barely high enough to accommodate my head.

Gary Snyder's broadside "Four Changes" was thumbtacked to the wall. Beside it and in contrast was an old engraving of a whaling ship beating its way through mountainous seas around a jagged black Cape Horn. There was an old iron safe in the corner with a legend on the door: "William Strome Mill and Lumber Co."

She perched on the desk beside the telephone, and I sat on a teetering swivel chair. At these close quarters I could pick up her odor. It was pleasant but rather lifeless, like wood ash or dried leaves. I wondered vaguely if she was still used up by the passion that had driven her up the mountain with Leo Broadhurst.

She caught the look in my eye and misinterpreted it, though not by much:

"I'm not as far out as you think. I have had one or two mystical experiences. I know that each and every night is the first night of eternity."

"What about the days?"

She answered shortly: "I do my best work at night."

"So I've been told."

She turned on me. She was quick on the uptake. "Has Martha been talking about me?"

"Just in the good sense. Martha said you saved her life when she was a kid."

She seemed pleased to hear this, but not to be diverted. "You know about my affair with Leo Broadhurst, or you wouldn't have brought his name up."

"I brought it up to identify his grandson."

"Am I being paranoid?"

"Maybe a little. You get that way living alone."

"How do you know that, doctor?"

"I'm not a doctor, I'm a patient. I live alone."

"By choice?"

"Not mine. My wife couldn't live with me. But now I'm used to it."

"So am I. I love my loneliness," she said rather unconvincingly. "Sometimes I paint all night. I don't need sunlight to do my kind of work. I paint things that don't reflect the light—spiritual conditions."

I thought of the paintings on the wall of the other room. They resembled serious contusions and open wounds. I said:

"Did Martha tell you about Jerry's accident? Apparently he broke his arm."

Her changeable face was pinched by compunction. "Where can he be?"

"On the road, unless he's thought of a better place to go."

"What's he running away from?"

"You'd know better than I."

She shook her head. "I haven't seen him in fifteen years."

"Why not?"

She made a gesture with her hands which seemed to say that I knew all about her. It was the gesture of a woman who spent more time in thought and fantasy than in talking and living.

"My husband—my former husband hasn't forgiven me for Leo."

"I've been wondering what happened to Leo."

"So have I. I went to Reno for my divorce, and he was supposed to join me there. But he never did. He stood me up cold." Her voice was bitter but light, like an anger that was no longer fully remembered. "I haven't seen him since I left Santa Teresa."

"Where did he go?"

"I wouldn't know. I've never heard from him."

"I heard he left the country."

"Where did you hear that?"

"Martha Crandall. She said she got it from you."

The woman seemed a little confused. "I may have said something of the sort. Leo did a lot of talking about taking me to Hawaii or Tahiti."

"He did more than talk, didn't he? I understand he booked passage for two on an English freighter going to Honolulu by way of Vancouver. The *Swansea Castle* sailed from San Francisco about July 6, 1955."

"And Leo was aboard?"

"He bought the tickets anyway. Weren't you with him?"

"No. By that time I'd been in Reno for at least a week. He must have gone with another woman."

"Or alone," I said.

"Not Leo. He couldn't stand to be alone. He had to have someone with him in order to feel really alive. Which is one reason I came back to this house after he left me. I wanted to prove that I could live alone, that I didn't need him.

"I was born in this house," she said, as if she'd been waiting fifteen years for a listener. "It was my grandfather's house, and my grandmother raised me after my mother died. It's interesting to come back to your childhood home. And creepy, too, like becoming very young and very old, both at the same time. The spirit that haunts the house."

That was how she looked, I thought, in her archaic long skirt very young and very old, the granddaughter and the grandmother in one person, slightly schizo.

She made a nervous self-depreciating gesture. "Am I boring you?"

"Hardly. But I'm interested in Leo. I don't know much about him."

"Neither do I, really. For a couple of years I went to sleep every night thinking about him and woke up in the morning hoping to see him that day. But afterwards I realized I hardly knew him at all. He was just a surface, if you know what I mean."

"Not exactly."

"I mean, *you* know, he had no interior life. He did things well. But that's all there was to him. He was what he did."

"What did he do?"

"He took part in nine or ten landings in the Pacific, and after the war he raced his boat and competed in tennis tournaments and played polo."

"That didn't leave him much time for women."

"He didn't need much time," she answered wryly. "Men without insides usually don't. I know this sounds like bad-mouthing, but it really isn't. I used to love Leo, and I probably still do. I don't know how I'd feel if he walked in this minute." She looked at the door.

"Is he likely to?"

She shook her head. "I don't even know if he's alive."

"Do you have any reason to think he's dead?"

"No. But I used to tell myself he was. It made it easier to bear. He never even bothered to phone me in Reno."

"I gather you took it hard."

"I cried a lot the first winter. But I crept in here and weathered it. Whatever happens to me now happens on canvas."

"Don't you ever get lonely?"

She gave me a hard look, to see if I was trying to move in on her. She must have seen that I wasn't, because she said:

"I'm lonely all the time—at least I used to be, until I learned to live alone. You know what I mean, if you live alone. The terrible humiliation and self-pity, with no one to blame for anything but yourself."

"I know what you mean." I brought her back to the subject of her marriage, which seemed to lie hidden at the center of the case. "Why did you leave your husband?"

"It was all over between us."

"Didn't you miss him and the little boy?"

"Not Brian. He got rough with me—you can't forgive a man once he does that. He threatened to kill me if I tried to take Jerry with me, or even see him. Of course I missed my son, but I learned to live without him. I don't need anyone, literally."

"How about figuratively?"

Her smile was deep and revealing, like a glimpse of the lights and shadows inside her head. "Figuratively is another matter. Of course I've felt like a dropout from the world. The worst loneliness I felt was for the children. Not just my own child—the children I taught in school. I keep seeing their faces and hearing their voices."

"Like Martha Crandall?"

"She was one of them once."

"And Albert Sweetner, and Fritz Snow."

She gave me a disenchanted look. "You've been doing quite a lot of research on me. Believe me, I'm not that important."

"Maybe you're not. But Albert and Fritz and Martha keep cropping up. I gather they came together in your high school class."

"Unfortunately, they did."

"Why do you say unfortunately?"

"The three of them made an explosive combination. You've probably heard about their famous trip to Los Angeles."

"I'm not quite clear about who the ringleader was. Was it Albert?"

"The authorities thought so at the time. He was the only one of the three who had a juvenile record. But I think it was originally Martha's idea." She added thoughtfully: "Martha was the one who came out of it best, too. If you can use that word about a forced marriage to an older man."

"Who was the father of her child? Albert Sweetner?"

"You'll have to ask Martha that." She changed the subject: "Is Albert really dead? Martha said on the phone that he was."

"He was stabbed to death last night. Don't ask me who was responsible, because I don't know."

She looked down sorrowfully as if the dead man was in the room at her feet. "Poor Albert. He didn't have much of a life. Most of his adult life was spent in prison."

"How do you know that, Miss Storm?"

"I tried to keep in touch with him." She added after a little hesitation: "As a matter of fact he came here to this house last week."

"Did you know he'd escaped from the pen?"

"What if I did?"

"You didn't turn him in."

"I'm not a very good citizen," she said with some irony. "It was his third conviction, and he was due to spend most of the rest of his life in prison."

"What was he in for?"

"Armed robbery."

"Weren't you afraid of him when he came to your door?"

"I never have been. I was surprised to see him, but not afraid."

"What did he want from you? Money?"

She nodded. "I wasn't able to give him much. I haven't sold a picture for some time."

"Did you give him anything else?"

"Some bread and cheese."

I was still carrying the green-covered book. I got it out of my pocket.

"That looks like a book I used to own," Ellen said.

"It is." I showed her the book-plate in the front.

"Where did you get this, anyway? Not from Al Sweetner?"

"From your son Jerry, ultimately."

"He kept it?" She seemed starved for any dry crumb from the past she had abandoned.

"Evidently he did." I pointed out his penciled signature on the fly-leaf. "But the thing I wanted to show you is inside." I opened the book and took the clipping out. "Did you give this to Al Sweetner?"

She took it in her hand and studied it. "Yes, I did."

"What for?"

"I thought it might be worth some money to him."

"That was a pretty double-edged act of charity. I can't believe your motives were entirely altruistic."

She flared up, rather weakly, as if nothing was worth getting really angry about. "What do you know about my motives?"

"Only what you tell me."

She was silent for a minute or two. "I suppose I *was* curious. I'd been holding onto this clipping all summer, wondering what I ought to do about it. I didn't know who had originated it. And of course I didn't know what had happened to Leo. I thought perhaps Albert could find out for me."

"So you turned him loose on Santa Teresa. That was kind of a crucial thing to do."

"What was so crucial about it?"

"Albert is dead, and so is Stanley Broadhurst." I spelled out the details for her.

"Then it was Stanley who placed this ad in the *Chronicle*," she said. "I'd have got in touch with him if I had known. But I thought it was probably Elizabeth."

"What made you think that?"

"I can remember when this picture was taken." She smoothed it on her knee, as if it was a feather she had found. "Elizabeth took it, before she knew that Leo and I were lovers. It brings back everything. Everything I had and everything I lost."

There were romantic tears in her eyes. My own eyes remained quite dry. I was thinking of everything that Elizabeth Broadhurst had lost.

chapter 27

THE GRAVEL IN THE DRIVEWAY crackled under the tires of a heavy car. Ellen lifted her head. I went to the front door, with her following close behind me.

Martha Crandall was already on the veranda. Her face changed when she saw me.

"They haven't come?"

"They never will if you don't keep out of sight. This place is staked out."

Ellen gave me a bright suspicious look. I asked her to go back inside and take Martha with her. Then I went down the steps to Lester Crandall's new bronze Sedan de Ville.

He hadn't moved from behind the wheel. "I told Mother it was a waste of time and energy. But she insisted on making the trip." He surveyed the front of the house with a cold eye. "So this is where the famous Ellen lives. It's practically falling down—"

I cut him short: "How about moving the car out of sight? Or slide over and let me."

"You move it. I'm slightly pooped."

He maneuvered his heavy body out from under the wheel and let me park the car behind the house. The elements of the case were coming together, and I felt crowded and excited. Perhaps I was subliminally aware of the noise of the second car.

When Lester Crandall and I went around to the front again, there was a figure at the foot of the driveway—an indeterminate bearded head surmounting a light triangle which looked like a warning sign. The figure was caught and drenched in approaching headlights. It was Jerry Kilpatrick, with one arm in a sling.

He must have recognized Crandall and me at the same time. He turned toward the moving headlights and called out: "Susie! Split!"

Her station wagon paused and went into reverse, backing up the road with a mounting roar of the engine. Jerry looked around uncertainly and ran stumbling out of the driveway into the arms of Willie Mackey and his large assistant Harold.

By the time I got to them, the station wagon was turning in the entrance to Haven Road, its headlights swiping like long paintbrushes at the tree trunks. It started off in the direction of San Francisco.

"I'll phone the bridge," Willie said.

I ran up the road to my car and followed the wagon. When I reached the near end of the bridge, traffic was beginning to line up in the right-hand lanes. The station wagon was standing empty at the head of the line.

I saw Susie out on the bridge, running hand in hand with the little boy toward the cable tower. A heavy man in patrolman's uniform was jolting along some distance behind them.

I went after them, running as hard as I could. Susie looked back once. She let go of Ronny's hand, moved to the railing, and went over. I thought for a sickening instant that she had taken the final plunge. Then I saw her light hair blowing above the railing.

The patrolman stopped before he got to her. The little boy loitered behind him, turning to me as I came up. He looked like an urchin, dirty-faced, in shorts and sweater that were too big for him.

He gave me a small embarrassed smile as if I had caught him doing something that he could be punished for, like playing hooky.

"Hello, Ronny."

"Hello. Look at what Susie's doing."

She was holding on with both hands, leaning out against the gray night. Along the wall of clouds that rose behind her, lightning flickered and prowled like somebody trying to set fire to a building.

I got a firm grip on the boy's cold hand and moved toward her. She stared at me without apparent recognition or interest, as if I belonged to a different race, the kind that lived past the age of twenty.

The patrolman turned to me: "You know her?"

"I know who she is. Her name is Susan Crandall."

"I hear you talking about me," she said. "Stop it or I'll jump."

The man in uniform backed away a few feet.

"Tell him to go further away," she said to me.

I told him, and he did. She looked at us with more interest, as part of a scene responding to her will. Her face appeared to be frozen except for her wide roving eyes. Her voice was flat:

"What are you going to do with Ronny?"

"Take him back to his mother."

"How do I know you will?"

"Ask Ronny. Ronny knows me."

The boy lifted his voice: "He let me feed peanuts to his birds."

"So you're the one," she said. "He's been talking about it all day."

She gave him a wan and patronizing smile, as if she herself had put off childish things. But with her white fingers clenching the railing, her hair blowing above it, she looked like half a child and half a bird perched over the long drop.

"What would you do to me if I came back over there?"

"Nothing."

She said as if I hadn't spoken: "Shoot me? Or send me to prison?"

"Neither of those things."

"What would you do?" she repeated.

"Take you to a safer place."

She shook her head gravely. "There is no safe place in this world."

"A safer place, I said."

"And what would you do to me there?"

"Nothing."

"You're a dirty filthy liar!"

She inclined her head to one side and looked down over her shoulder, into the depth of my lying and the terrible depth of her rage.

Toward the San Francisco end of the bridge, the tow truck that carried the roving patrol came into view. I made a pushing signal with both hands, and the patrolman repeated it. The truck slowed down and stopped.

"Come back, Susie," I said.

"Yeah," Ronny said. "Come back. I'm afraid you'll fall."

"I've already fallen," she said bitterly. "I've got no place to go."

"I'll take you to your mother."

"I don't want to see her. I don't want to live with those two ever again."

"Tell them that," I said. "You're old enough to live with other people. You don't have to stay over there to prove it."

"I like it over here." But after a moment she said: "What other people?"

"The world is full of them."

"But I'm afraid."

"After what you've been through, you're still afraid?"

She nodded. Then she looked down once more. I was afraid I'd lost her.

But she was saying goodbye to the long drop. She climbed back over

the railing and rested against it, breathing quickly and lightly. The little boy moved toward her, pulling me along by the hand, and took her hand.

We walked back to the head of the bridge, where Willie Mackey and his assistant were talking to some local officers. Willie appeared to have some clout with them. They took our names, asked a few pointed questions, and let us go.

chapter 28

WILLIE TOOK RONNY with him in the station wagon. I hated to let the boy out of my sight. But I wanted a chance to question Susan before she saw her parents.

She sat inert while I extricated my car. The patrolman who had chased her out the walkway stopped the northbound traffic. He looked relieved to see us go.

She said in some alarm: "Where are you taking me?"

"To Ellen Storm's house. Isn't that where you wanted to go?"

"I guess so. My mother and father are there, aren't they?"

"They arrived just before you did."

"Don't tell them I tried to jump, will you?" she said in a low voice.

"You can hardly keep it a secret. Any of it." I paused to let the fact sink in. "I still don't understand why you ran away like that."

"They stopped me at the head of the bridge. They wouldn't let me through. They started yelling at me and asking me questions. Don't you ask me any questions, either," she added breathlessly. "I don't have to answer."

"It's true, you don't. But if you won't tell me what happened, I wonder who will."

"When are we talking about? On the bridge?"

"Yesterday, on the mountain, when you went there with Stanley Broadhurst and Ronny. Why did you go up there?"

"Mr. Broadhurst asked me to. That Sweetner man told him about me –the things I said when I blew my mind."

"What things?"

"I don't want to talk about them. I don't even want to think about them. You can't make me."

There was a wild note in her voice which made me slow the car and watch her out of the corner of my eye. "Okay. Why did you go to Mr. Broadhurst's house on Friday? Did Albert Sweetner send you?"

"No. It was Jerry's idea. He said I ought to go and talk to Mr. Broadhurst, and I did. Then we went up the mountain Saturday morning."

"What for?"

"We wanted to see if something was buried there."

"Something?"

"A little red car. We went up there in a little red car."

Her voice had changed in pitch and register. It sounded as if her mind had regressed, or shifted to a different level of reality. I said:

"Who's 'we'?"

"Mommy and me. But I don't want to talk about what happened then. It was a long time ago when I blew my mind."

"We're talking about yesterday morning," I said. "Was Stanley Broadhurst digging for a car?"

"That's right—a little red sports car. But he never got down deep enough."

"What happened?"

"I don't know exactly. Ronny had to go to the john. I got the key from Mr. Broadhurst and took him to the one in the Mountain House. Then I heard Mr. Broadhurst yell. I thought he was calling me, and I went outside. I could see Mr. Broadhurst lying in the dirt. Another man was standing over him—a man with a black beard and long hippie hair. He was hitting Mr. Broadhurst with the pickax. I could see the blood on Mr. Broadhurst's back. It made a red pattern, and then there was a fire under the trees, and that made an orange pattern. The man dragged Mr. Broadhurst in the hole and shoveled dirt on him."

"What did you do, Susan?"

"I went back in and got Ronny, and we ran away. We sneaked down the trail into the canyon. The man didn't see us."

"Can you describe him? Was he young or old?"

"I couldn't tell, he was too far away. And he had on big dark glasses –wraparounds– so I couldn't make out his face. He must have been young, though, with all that hair."

"Could it have been Albert Sweetner?"

"No. He doesn't have long hair."

"What if he was wearing a wig?"

She considered the question. "I still don't think it was him. Anyway, I don't want to talk about him. He said if I talked about him he would kill me."

"When did he tell you that?"

"I said I didn't want to talk about it. You can't make me."

Her face was struck white by the headlights of a passing car. She turned away as if they had been searching out her secrets.

We were approaching the entrance to Haven Road. I pulled off the pavement and stopped under the trees. The girl crouched against the door on the far side.

"You stay away from me," she said between spasms of shivering. "Don't you do anything to me."

"What makes you think I would, Susan?"

"You're the same as that Sweetner man. He said all he wanted me to do was tell him what I remembered. But he pushed me down onto the dirty old bed."

"In the loft of the Mountain House?"

"Yes. He hurt me. He made me bleed." Her eyes looked through me as if I was made of cloud and she was peering into the night behind me. "Something went bang. I could see the blood on his head. It made a red pattern. Mommy ran out the door and didn't come back. She didn't come back all night."

"What night are you talking about?"

"The night they buried him near the sycamore tree."

"That happened in the daytime, didn't it?"

"No. It was dark night. I could see the light moving around in the trees. It was some kind of a big machine. It made a noise like a monster. I was afraid it would come and bury me. But it didn't know I was there," she said in her regressive fairy-tale voice.

"Where were you?"

"I hid in the loft until my mommy came back. She didn't come back all night. She told me not to tell anybody, ever."

"You've seen her, then, since it happened?"

"Of course I've seen her."

"When?"

"All my life," she said.

"I'm talking about the last thirty-six hours. Mr. Broadhurst was buried yesterday."

"You're trying to mix me up, like that Sweetner man." She hugged her hands between her legs, and shuddered. "Don't tell my mother what he did to me. I'm not supposed to let a man come near me. And I never will again."

She looked at me with deep distrust. I was overcome by angry pity—pity for her and anger against myself. It was cruel to question her under the circumstances, stirring up the memories and the fears that had driven her almost out of life.

I sat beside her without speaking and considered her answers. They had seemed at first like a flight of ideas which took off from the facts and never returned to them. But as I sorted through the ideas and images, they seemed to refer to several different events which were linked and overlapping in her consciousness.

"How many times have you been in the Mountain House, Susie?"

Her lips moved, silently counting the occasions. "Three times, that I remember. Yesterday, when I took Ronny to the john. And a couple of days ago, when that man Sweetner hurt me in the loft. And once with my mother when I was a little girl, younger than Ronny. The gun went bang and she ran away and I hid in the loft all night." The girl began to sob dryly and brokenly. "I want my mother."

chapter 29

HER PARENTS WERE waiting in front of the twin-towered house. Susan got out of my car and went toward them, feet dragging, head down. Her mother took her in her arms and called her pet names. Their warm coming together gave me a flicker of hope for both of them.

Lester Crandall stood off to one side, looking shut out. He moved toward me with an uncertain light in his eye, an uncertain gait, as if the world was moving away from under him and I was the one who had set it spinning.

"Your sidekick"—he gestured toward the house, and I assumed he meant Willie—"your sidekick told me you talked her in off the bridge. I'm very grateful to you."

"I'm glad I reached her in time. Why don't you say something to her, Mr. Crandall?"

He stole a sideways look at her. "I wouldn't know what to say."

"Tell her you're glad she didn't kill herself."

He shook the idea off. "I wouldn't dignify it. She had to be faking."

"She wasn't. She's attempted suicide twice in the last four days. It won't be safe to take her home unless you get her proper medical care."

He turned to look at the two women, who were moving across the veranda into the house. "Susie didn't get hurt, did she?"

"She's physically and mentally hurt. She's been drugged and raped. She's witnessed at least one murder and possibly two. You can't expect her to handle these things without psychiatric help."

"Who raped her, for God's sake?"

"Albert Sweetner."

Crandall became very still. I sensed the core of force in his aging body. "I'll kill the dirty son."

"He's already dead. Maybe you knew that."

"No."

"You haven't seen him in the past few days?"

"I only saw him once in my life. That was about eighteen years ago, when they sent him up to Preston for stealing my car. I was a witness at the trial."

"I heard he paid a visit to the Yucca Tree Inn the summer he got out of Preston. Don't you remember?"

"All right, I saw him twice. What does that prove?"

"You can tell me what happened."

"You know what happened," he said, "or you wouldn't be bringing it up. He tried to wreck my marriage. He probably spent his three years in Preston figuring out how to do it. He said he was Susie's father, and he was going to make a legal claim to her. I beat him up." He struck the palm of his left hand with his right fist, more than once. "I hit Martha, too. And she took Susie, and left me. I don't blame her. She didn't come back for a long time after that."

"Did she go with Albert Sweetner?"

"I don't know. She never told me. I thought I was never going to see Susie or her again. It was like my life had gone to pieces. Now it's gone to pieces for sure."

"You have a chance to put it back together. You're the only one who can."

His eyes caught my meaning and held it. But he said: "I don't know, Archer. I'm getting old—I'll be sixty on my next birthday. I shouldn't have taken on the two of them in the first place."

"Who else would have?"

He answered me emphatically. "Plenty of men would have married Martha. She was a raving beauty. She still is."

"We won't argue about that. Have you thought about where you're going to spend the night?"

"I thought we'd drive back as far as the Yucca Tree. I'm pretty worn out myself, but Martha always seems to have something left."

"And tomorrow?"

"Back to the Palisades. One thing, it's handy to the Medical Center. I thought I'd take her in there and have her checked," he said, as if it was entirely his own idea.

"Do that, Lester. And take good care of her. She witnessed a murder yesterday, as I said, and the murderer may try to silence her." I told him about the bearded man and the false hair I had found on Al Sweetner's body.

"Does that mean Sweetner did the Broadhurst killing?"

"Whoever did it wants us to think so. But it's hardly possible. I saw Sweetner in Northridge around the time that Stanley Broadhurst was killed." I hesitated. "Where were you about that time, by the way?"

"Somewhere in Los Angeles, looking for Susie."

I didn't ask him if he could prove it. Perhaps in recognition of this, he got out his wallet and offered me several hundred-dollar bills. But I didn't want to take anything from him or owe him anything before the case was ended.

"Put your money away," I said.

"Don't you like money?"

"I may send you a bill when this thing is over."

I went inside. Willie Mackey was sitting in the front hall with Ronny on his knee. He was telling the boy about an old con he had known who had tried to swim ashore from Alcatraz.

I found Martha Crandall and her daughter in the front room. They were sitting side by side in the bay window, their pretty blonde heads close together.

An hour or so ago the big old house had been as quiet as a hermitage. Now it seemed more like a family service agency. I was hoping that the whole thing wouldn't blow up in my face.

Deciding to risk it, I caught Martha Crandall's eye and beckoned her over to my side of the room.

"What is it?" she said impatiently, with a backward look at Susan. "I hate to leave her."

"You may have to, though."

She looked at me in dismay. "You mean you're going to put her away?"

"You may decide to, temporarily. She's got a lot on her mind, and she's suicidal."

The woman's shoulders made a heavy movement which was meant to be lighter. "That was just a grandstand play, she says so herself."

"So are a lot of successful suicides. Nobody knows where the grandstanding leaves off and the thing turns dead serious. Anyone who even threatens suicide needs counseling."

"That's what I'm trying to give her. Counseling."

"I mean professional counseling, from a psychiatrist. I've discussed this with your husband, and he says he'll take her to the Medical Center tomorrow. But you're the one who will have to carry the ball and follow through. It might be a good idea if you talked to the shrinks together."

She seemed appalled. "Am I such a rotten mother?"

"I didn't say that. But I don't think you've ever leveled with her, have you?"

"What about?"

"Your own bad times."

"I couldn't," she said with vehemence.

"Why not?"

"I'd be ashamed."

"Let her know you're human, anyway."

"I am that," she said. "All right, I'll do it."

"Is that a promise?"

"Sure it is. I love her, you know. Susie's my little girl. Not so little any more, either."

She turned back toward her daughter, but I stopped her and led her into the furthest corner of the room. Ellen's canvases hung along the wall like imperfectly remembered hallucinations.

She said: "What else do you want from me?"

"A few words of truth. I want to know what happened fifteen years ago, when Albert Sweetner visited the Yucca Tree."

She looked at me as if I'd slapped her. "This is a lousy time to bring that up."

"It's the only time we have. I understand you left your husband. What happened after that?"

The woman pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes. "Has Lester been talking?"

"Some. But not enough. He knows you walked out on him and took Susan along. And he knows you came back eventually. But he doesn't know what happened in between."

"Nothing happened. I thought it through and changed my mind, that's all. Anyway, this is strictly my private business."

"Maybe it would be if you'd kept it strictly private. But other people got mixed up in it. One of them was Susan, and she was old enough to remember."

Martha Crandall looked at her daughter with guilty curiosity. The girl said:

"You're talking about me, aren't you? It isn't very nice."

Her tone was quite impersonal and remote. She sat very still in the embrasure like an actress forbidden to step out through the proscenium into the welter of reality. Her mother shook her head at her, and then at me.

"I can't take this. And I don't have to," she said.

"What do you propose to do? Let Susan work it out for herself without any help from you?"

Martha hung her head like a naughty child. "Nobody ever helped me."

"Maybe I can help you, Mrs. Crandall. Al Sweetner told your husband that he was Susan's father. But I don't think he could have been. Not even an Al Sweetner would force his own daughter."

"Who told you he did that?"

"Susan told me."

"Do we have to talk about these things?" Her look was reproachful, as if I'd made them real by naming them.

"If Susan could, we can."

"When did you talk to her?"

"Between the bridge and here."

"You had no right—"

"The hell I didn't. She's been under terrible pressure. She had to let it out some way."

"Pressure from what?"

"Too many deaths," I said. "Too many memories."

Her eyes widened like lenses, as if they were trying to pick up faint light from the past. But all I could see in their centers was my own head reflected in miniature, twice.

"What did Susan tell you?" she said.

"Not very much. She really didn't intend to tell me anything, but the memories forced their way out. Wasn't she with you in the Mountain House one night in the summer of 1955?"

"I don't know what night you're talking about."

"The night Leo Broadhurst was shot."

Her fringed eyelids came down over her eyes. She swayed a little, as if the memory of the shot had wounded her. I held her upright, and felt the warmth of her living flesh on my hands.

"Does Susan remember? How could she? She was only three."

"She remembers enough. Too much. Was Broadhurst killed?"

"I don't know. I ran away and left him in the cabin. I was drunk, and I couldn't get his car to start. But it was gone in the morning, and so was he."

"What kind of a car was it?"

"A Porsche. A little red Porsche. It wouldn't start, so I ran away on foot. I forgot all about Susan. I don't even remember where I went." She moved away from my hands as if they carried the contagion of that night. "What happened to Susie?"

"Didn't you go back for her?"

"I did in the morning. I found her asleep in the loft. How could she remember the shooting if she was asleep in the loft?"

"She was awake when it happened, and in the room. She didn't make it up."

"Is Leo dead?"

"I think so."

Martha looked at her daughter, and I turned to look. The girl was watching us intently, less like an actress now than a spectator. Our voices were too low for her to hear, but she seemed to know what we were talking about.

"Does she remember who shot him?" her mother said.

"No. Do you?"

"I never saw who it was. Leo and I were making love, and I was drunk—"

"Didn't you hear the shot?"

"I guess I did, but I didn't believe it. You know? I didn't know he was hurt until I tasted the blood on his face." Her tongue moved over her lips. "God, what you're dragging out of me. I thought I'd blanked out on that night. It was the worst night of my life, and I thought that it was going to be the best. We were going to go away, all three of us, and start a new life together in Hawaii. Leo bought the tickets that same day."

"Was he Susan's father?"

"I think so. I've always thought so. That's why I went back to him when Lester threw me out. He was the first man I ever let touch me."

"It wasn't Al Sweetner? Or Fritz Snow?"

She shook her head rather fiercely. "I was already pregnant when I went to L.A. with them. That was why I went."

"And you let them take the rap."

"Leo had a lot to lose. What did they have to lose?"

"Their whole lives."

She lifted her hands as though to examine them for dirt or scars. A darkness and sadness had risen in her eyes. She ducked her head and hid her face in her hands.

Susan stepped out of her niche as if a spell had broken, and came toward us. Her face was unnaturally bright, like a radiant substance with a short half-life.

"You're making my mother cry."

"It won't do her any harm. She's human like the rest of us."

The girl looked at the woman in faint surprise.

chapter 30

I LEFT THEM TOGETHER and went out into the hallway. The little boy was lolling on Willie's knee, stunned by fatigue.

"He's just about out for the count," Willie said. "And I've got a new bride waiting for me eagerly in San Francisco."

"Give me a few more minutes. Where's Miss Storm?"

"In there with her son." He pointed his thumb at the closed door of the small room under the stairs. "He's a hardhead, which is why I'm sitting here."

"What did he do?"

"Tried to fight Harold one-handed. Harold used to play football for the Forty-Niners."

"Where's Harold now?"

"Outside watching the house, in case anybody else shows up." He made a dour face, and gave the boy a gentle poke in the ribs. "Perish the thought, eh, sleepyhead?"

I knocked on the door of the small room. Ellen told me to come in.

She was in the swivel chair. Her son was sitting on the floor beside the safe as if it was a stove that gave no heat. His face was so pale and wretched that it made his red hair and beard seem pasted on. His mouth had a nervous twitch, as if he was biting something, or being bitten.

"This is Mr. Archer," Ellen said.

With some idea of showing friendly feeling, I asked him how his arm was. He spat on the floor in my direction.

"It's broken," Ellen said. "He got it set at a clinic in the Haight-Ashbury. They asked him to check back tomorrow—"

The boy cut off her sentence with a slashing movement of his good

arm. "Don't tell him anything. He was the one that made me lose *Ariadne*."

"Sure I did. Also I broke your arm by hitting you on the gun-butt with my head."

"I should have shot you."

He was a hardhead, as Willie said. I couldn't tell how much of the hardness was his own and how much was induced by physical and mental pain.

"He's in trouble—I guess you know that," I said to Ellen.

"Do you mean you have to arrest him?"

"That isn't my job. And it isn't my job to decide what to do with him. I'm not his father."

"But you're working for him, aren't you?" Jerry said. "If you think you're going to drag me back to Slobville—"

I turned on him: "Slobville can live without you. If you think the populace is waiting on the docks for your return, think again."

That silenced him, but I felt a little cheap about talking him down, and a little dishonest. My mind threw up an image of Roger Armistead on the marina float, looking out to sea.

"He won't go back to his father," Ellen said. "I've been wondering if he couldn't stay with me, at least for the present. I can arrange to get him the care he needs."

"Do you think you can handle him?"

"I can give him shelter, anyway. I've given shelter to other troubled people." Her face was open, willing without being eager.

"I don't know what the law will have to say."

"How does he stand with the law?"

"It depends on his record, if any."

We both looked down at Jerry. He sat motionless, except for his twitch, like a sudden old man in the corner.

"Have you ever been arrested?" I said.

"No. I can hardly wait."

"It isn't funny. If the authorities wanted to throw the book at you, they could be rough. Taking the yacht could be grand larceny. Taking the boy could be child stealing or kidnaping or contributing to the delinquency of a minor."

Jerry looked up in dismay. "What do you think I did to him? I was trying to save his life."

"You almost lost it for him."

Jerry got his feet under him and rose awkwardly, grimacing with pain. "You don't have to tell me that. I know I wrecked the yacht. But I didn't steal her. Mr. Armistead left me in charge of her. Ask him."

"You better talk to him yourself. But not tonight." I said to his mother: "Why don't you put him to bed?"

He didn't argue. She walked him out with her arm around his shoulders. There was a look of acceptance on her face, almost as if she had lived too long without external trouble.

I knew it wasn't a solution. Ellen was far gone in solitude, and he was too old to need a mother, really. He had to live out his time of trouble, as she had. And there was no assurance that he would. He belonged to a generation whose elders had been poisoned, like the pelicans, with a kind of moral DDT that damaged the lives of their young.

But I had no more time to worry about Jerry. I pulled the swivel chair around to face the phone and dialed Mrs. Broadhurst's ranch in Santa Teresa. Jean answered immediately, in a voice that hung almost toneless between expectation and despair:

"This is the Broadhurst residence."

"Archer speaking. I have your boy Ronny. He's all right."

She didn't answer right away. Through the faint buzz and clamor on the line I could hear her breathing, as if she was the only life in an electronic universe.

"Where are you, Mr. Archer?"

"Sausalito. Ronny's safe and in good condition."

"Yes, I heard you." Another silence. She said in a rather grudging tone: "What about the girl?"

"I have her safe. She isn't in very good emotional shape."

"I wouldn't have thought so."

"But she didn't really intend to steal your son. She was running away from the man who killed your husband."

"All the way to Sausalito?" she said incredulously.

"Yes."

"Who was the man?"

"A bearded type with shoulder-length black hair, wearing dark wraparound glasses. Does that suggest anyone to you?"

"There are plenty of longhairs in Northridge. Here, too, for that matter. I haven't had many contacts with them in the last few years. I don't know who it would be."

"He may be one of the crazies, a random killer. I'm going to make a suggestion which I want you to act on as soon as I hang up. Call the sheriff and ask him to send a man out. Insist on having him stay there. If he won't, take a taxi downtown and check into a good hotel."

"But you told me to stay here in this house."

"That isn't necessary any more. I've got your boy. I'll bring him home tomorrow."

"Could I possibly speak to him tonight? I just want to hear his voice."

I opened the door and called the boy. He slid off Willie's knee and came running, taking the receiver in both hands.

"Is that you, Mommy? . . . The boat got sunk, but I came in on a surfboard. . . . I'm not cold. Mrs. Rawlins gave me her little boy's clothes, and a hamburger. Susie bought me another hamburger in San Francisco. . . . Susie? She's all right, I guess. She wanted to jump off the Golden Gate Bridge. But we talked her out of it."

He listened for a moment, his face growing sober and concerned, then handed me the receiver as if it was hot. "Mommy's sad."

I said to her: "Are you all right?"

She answered in an emotion-clogged voice: "I'm fine. And I'm deeply grateful. When will I see you and Ronny?"

"About noon tomorrow, I'd say. We both need some rest before we drive south."

A short while later, after the others had left, Ellen and I put Ronny to bed in a room which she said had been hers when she was a child. An old toy phone was standing on the table beside the cot. As if to demonstrate that he never got tired, the boy picked it up and spoke into it distinctly:

"Calling Space Control. Calling Space Control. Do you hear me? Do you hear me?"

We closed the door on his fantasy and faced each other in the upstairs hall. The hanging yellow electric light, the stains of old rainstorms on the walls and ceiling, and the shadows that imitated them seemed to generate other fantasies. The rest of the world was cut off and far away. I felt shipwrecked on the dim shores of the past.

"How's Jerry?"

"He's worried about what Armistead will do to him. But he quieted down. I gave him a back rub and a sleeping pill."

"I'll talk to Armistead when I get the chance."

"I was hoping you would. Jerry's pretty tense about it. He feels terribly guilty."

"What did you do with the rest of the sleeping pills?"

"I have them."

She touched the place between her breasts. She must have seen my eyes rest there and travel down her body. Both of us moved, so that her body was resting rather sleepily against mine. I felt her hand moving on my back, giving me a kind of sample back rub.

"I don't have a bed made up for you. You can sleep with me if you like."

"Thanks, but it wouldn't be a good idea. You do all your living on canvas, remember?"

"I have a large unused canvas that I've been saving," she said rather obscurely. "What are you afraid of, Archer?"

It was hard to say. I liked the woman. I almost trusted her. But I was already working deep in her life. I didn't want to buy a piece of it or commit myself to her until I knew what the consequences would be.

Instead of answering her in words, I kissed her and disengaged myself.

She looked more rejected than deprived. "I don't sleep with many men, in case you're wondering. Leo was the only real lover I ever had."

She was quiet for a while. Then she said: "I gave you a false impression earlier. I was forgetting, lying to myself. Whatever I had with Leo was real — just about the realest thing in my life." Her eyes lit up with the memory as they hadn't lit for me. "I was in love with him. And he loved me while it lasted. I didn't believe that he would ever stop. But it ended, quite suddenly."

Her eyes closed, and opened again with a changed expression, of wary loss. She leaned on the watermarked wall. The night was running down like a transplanted heart.

"There's something I want to tell you," I said. "I don't know if I should."

"Is it something painful?"

"Yes. Maybe not immediately painful."

"About Leo?"

"I think he's dead."

Her eyes didn't waver. Only a kind of shadow crossed her face, as if the hanging light above her head had moved.

"How long dead?"

"The whole fifteen years."

"And that's why he never came to join me?"

"I think so." It was partly true, anyway. As for the other part of the truth, I was trying to decide whether to bring up Martha Crandall. "Unless my witnesses are hallucinating, somebody shot Leo and buried him."

"Where?"

"Near the Mountain House. Do you have any idea who might have killed him?"

"No." After a moment's hesitation, she said: "It wasn't I."

I waited for her to go on. She said finally:

"You mentioned witnesses. Who are they?"

"Martha Crandall and her daughter."

"Did he go back to Martha?"

She raised one hand to her mouth, as if she had made a damaging admission. On the heels of it, I said bluntly:

"He was in bed with Martha when he was shot. Apparently *she* was

the one who came back to *him*. Her husband threw her out." I hesitated. "You knew about their earlier affair?"

"Did I not. I first got to know Leo through it. Martha came to me when she got into trouble." She was silent for a moment, then said with some irony: "I interposed my body between them."

Nearly everything had been said. But we seemed to be held together by a feeling, impersonal but almost as strong as a friendship or a passion, that there was still more to say. The past was unwinding and rewinding like yarn which the two of us held between us.

"What about Elizabeth Broadhurst?" I said. "How did a man like Leo happen to marry a woman like Elizabeth?"

"The war brought them together. He was stationed at a military base near Santa Teresa, and she was active in the USO. She was a handsome woman when she was young. Socially prominent. Wealthy. She had all the obvious qualifications." For the first time Ellen's face was pulled to one side by malice. "But she was a failure as a wife."

"How do you know?"

"Leo told me all about their marriage, such as it was. She was a frozen woman, a daddy's girl."

"The frozen ones sometimes explode."

"I know they do."

I said carefully: "Do you think she shot Leo?"

"It's possible. She threatened to. It's one reason I left Santa Teresa and tried to take Leo with me. I was afraid of Elizabeth."

"That doesn't prove she's a murderer."

"I know that. But I'm not just being subjective. Jerry told me something as we were talking just now." Her voice wisped off, and so did her attention, as if she was listening to an internal voice.

"What did Jerry tell you?"

"He was telling me why he couldn't go back to Brian—to his father. Elizabeth Broadhurst came to their house one night this summer to talk to Brian. There was more than just talk involved. She was crying and yelling, and Jerry couldn't help overhearing everything. Brian had been extorting money from her. And not only money. He'd forced her into some kind of a real estate partnership in which she put up the land and he put up very little or nothing."

"How could he force her into it?"

"That's the question," she said.

Ellen went to bed alone. I got the sleeping bag out of the trunk of my car and slept across the door of Ronny's room.

The old house creaked like a ship sailing through the dangerous world. I dreamed I was rounding the Horn.

chapter 31

IT WAS RAINING IN PALO ALTO, where Ronny and I had breakfast. It was raining in Gilroy and King City, and in Petroleum City it looked like rain.

I stopped at the Yucca Tree Inn to check on the Crandalls. Joy Rawlins was back on the desk. She told me Lester Crandall had rehired her that morning before he took off with his family for Los Angeles.

"Did you see Susan?" I asked her.

"Yeah. She's calmed down quite a bit. All three of them seemed to be making more sense for a change."

Before I left the Inn, I called the Santa Teresa office of the Forest Service. Kelsey wasn't there, but I left a message for him: to meet me at noon, if possible, at Mrs. Broadhurst's house. Then Ronny and I went back on the freeway for the final leg of our journey.

Using the buckle of a seat-belt as a microphone, the boy kept Space Control informed of our progress. Once he said into his imaginary mike:

"Daddy. This is Ronny. Do you hear me?"

We were just a few miles north of Santa Teresa, in what must have been familiar territory to him. He dropped the buckle and turned in the seat to speak to me directly:

"Is Daddy coming back?"

"No. He isn't."

"You mean he's dead, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Did the bogy man kill him?"

"I'm afraid he did." This was the first real evidence I'd had from another witness that the man in Susan's story of the murder was neither invention nor fantasy. "Did you get a good look at him, Ronny?"

"Pretty good."

"What did he look like?"

"A bogy man." His voice was hushed and earnest. "He had long black hair and a long black beard."

"How was he dressed?"

"All in black. He had black slacks and a black top, and he was wearing black glasses."

His voice was singsong, and it made me distrust his accuracy. "Was it anyone you knew?"

He seemed appalled by the idea. "No. I didn't know him. He was the wrong size."

"What do you mean by that?"

"He wasn't the same size as anybody I know."

"The same size as who?"

"Nobody," he said obscurely.

"Was he large or small?"

"Small, I think. I can't help it if I didn't know him."

The boy was showing signs of strain, and I dropped my questioning of him. But he had a final question to ask me:

"Is Mommy okay?"

"She's okay. You talked to her on the phone last night, remember?"

"I remember. But I thought maybe it was taped."

"It was for real."

"That's good." He fell against me and went to sleep.

He was still sleeping when we drove up the canyon to his grandmother's house. His mother was waiting on the veranda steps. She ran across the driveway and opened the car door and lifted him out.

She held him until he struggled to be free. Then she set him down and gave me both her hands:

"I'll never be able to thank you."

"Don't try. It worked out luckily for all of us. Except Stanley."

"Yes. Poor Stanley." There was a puzzled cleft, like a dry knife-cut, between her eyebrows. "What became of the blond girl?"

"Susan is with her parents. They're going to get her psychiatric care."

"And Jerry Kilpatrick? His father's been calling me."

"He's staying with his mother in Sausalito for the present."

"You mean you didn't have either of them arrested?"

"No I didn't."

"But I thought they were kidnapers."

"So did I, at one point. I was wrong. They're a pair of alienated adolescents. They seem to have thought they were rescuing Ronny from the adult

world. To a certain extent it was true. The girl saw your husband murdered yesterday. Fifteen years ago, when she was younger than Ronny, she witnessed another murder. If she reacted pretty wildly to this one, you can hardly blame her."

The cleft between Jean's penciled brows deepened. "Has there been another murder?"

"It appears so. Your husband's father—Leo—didn't run off with a woman after all. Apparently he was killed in the Mountain House and buried nearby. It's what your husband and the girl were digging for yesterday."

Jean looked at me in confusion. Perhaps she understood my words, but they laid too great a load on her stretched emotions. She looked around her, saw that Ronny had disappeared, and began to call his name quite frantically.

He came out of the house. "Where's Grandma Nell?"

"She isn't here," Jean said. "She's in the hospital."

"Is she dead too?"

"Hush. Of course not. Dr. Jerome says she'll be coming home tomorrow or the next day."

"How is your mother-in-law?" I said to her.

"She's going to be all right. Her EKG was virtually normal this morning, and so was her conversation. It gave her a tremendous lift when I told her you were on your way with Ronny. If you have the time, I know she'd love to have you drop in and see her."

"Is she allowed visitors?"

"Yes."

"I may do that."

The three of us went inside. While Ronny inspected the stuffed bird collection, his mother filled me in on the past twenty-four hours. They had been mostly waiting. She had phoned the sheriff's office, as I urged her to, but they had been unable to give her any protection. Brian Kilpatrick had expressed a willingness to come over. She told him it wasn't necessary.

"Forget about Kilpatrick."

She gave me a slow look. "It wasn't exactly what you think. He intended to bring his fiancee along."

"Forget about her, too. What you need is a guard."

"I have you."

"But I won't be staying. I wish I could persuade you to leave town."

"I can't. Grandma Nell is depending on me."

"So is Ronny. You may have to make a choice."

"You seriously think he's still in danger?"

"I have to think so. He saw the man who murdered your husband."

"Could he describe him?"

"Not really. He had a beard and a wig that were probably false. But I got the impression that it might just possibly be someone that Ronny knows. I wouldn't press him on the subject. But if he does any spontaneous talking keep a record, will you? Every word if you can."

"I will."

She looked across the room at her son as if his round skull contained the secret meaning of her life. He said with the light of discovery on his face:

"There's been a fire around here. I can see it and I can smell it. Who started the fire?"

"That's what we're trying to find out." I turned to his mother. "I want you to think about getting out of here before dark."

"Nothing happened last night."

"Your son wasn't here last night. You'll both be safer in the Wallers' apartment in Los Angeles. Just say the word, and I'll drive you—"

She cut me short: "I'll think about it." Then she softened her answer. "I'm really very grateful for the offer. Only it's hard for me to think right now. I only know I can't go back to Northridge."

I heard the rising mutter of a car approaching the house and went outside. It was Kelsey, driving a Forest Service station wagon. He climbed out and gave me a semiofficial handshake. His suit was rumpled, and his eyes had a slight glare in them.

"I got your message, Archer. What's on your mind?"

"There's quite a lot to tell you. First, I'd like to know what you got from your witness yesterday. The coed who saw the bearded man driving the car."

"That was all she saw," Kelsey said with some disappointment. "All she could give me was a general description."

"What about the car?"

"It was an older car. She couldn't tell the make. She thought it had a California license, but she wasn't absolutely sure. I'm going to take another crack at her today. Shipstad of the LAPD asked me to."

"You got in touch with Arnie?"

"I called him this morning. He's pretty well discarded the idea that the wig and the beard belonged to Albert Sweetner. They didn't fit him at all well. Shipstad is trying to trace them through wig stores and cosmetic companies. But it's a big job and it may take a while. It would help if we could get a better description of the man *my* witness saw."

"He was fairly small," I said, "if I can believe *my* witness. He was wearing black slacks, some kind of black shirt or sweater, and dark

glasses. And there's no doubt he murdered Stanley Broadhurst." I filled him in on what I had learned in the last twenty-four hours. "Can we get hold of a bulldozer and a man to operate it?"

"I believe we left one on the campus, in case the fire came back. I can run it myself if it's still there."

"Do you think the fire will come back?"

"Not unless the wind plays us false. We set a successful backfire above Buckhorn Meadow this morning. We should have it under control in another twenty-four hours—maybe sooner if we get the rain that's predicted." He glanced at the moving sky. "I'm hoping for just enough rain to discourage Rattlesnake but not enough to bring the mountain down on us."

Kelsey asked me to ride with him in the station wagon. In order to keep my freedom of movement I said that I would follow along in my car.

We drove out through the scorched mouth of the canyon and up into the foothills. The campus playing field, which had been swarming with men and machines the day before, was almost deserted. A couple of maintenance men were picking up bottles and scraps of paper and replacing turf.

A tractor equipped with an earth-moving blade was standing in the lot behind the bleachers. While Kelsey was getting it started, I climbed to the top of the stands and looked around.

Whitecaps stippled the surface of the ocean. Above the coastline to the southeast, smoke hung like early twilight in the sky. At the other extreme of vision, storm clouds were moving down from the northwest, trailing black rain along the coastal mountains. It looked like a day of change.

Kelsey rode the tractor down the hillside trail. I followed along in his dust, carrying a spade I had borrowed from the maintenance men.

For twenty or thirty minutes I leaned on a sycamore trunk and watched the tractor push dirt in a slow back-and-forth rhythm. When it got about as deep into the earth as a man is tall, its leading edge jarred against metal and Kelsey nearly pitched head first from his seat.

He backed out of the gradual hole he had made and let me climb down into it. In a few minutes I had spaded clear enough of the metallic obstruction to see that it was a dark red car top blotched with the lighter red of rust and shaped like a Porsche roof.

I cleared the left front window and smashed it with the spade. The odor of corruption came out, dry and thin and shocking. In the hollow of the car's body something wrapped in a rotting blanket lay on the front seat.

I stretched head down in the dirt and peered in at the dead man. The flesh was always the first to go, and then the hair, and then the bones, and finally the teeth. Leo Broadhurst was all bones and teeth.

chapter 32

I LEFT KELSEY widening and deepening the hole around the buried car and phoned the sheriff-coroner's office from the college. Then I drove down the hill and paid another visit to Fritz Snow's house.

Somewhat to my surprise, Fritz answered the door himself. He was dressed in an old brown cardigan and slacks, with worn sneakers on his feet. His shoulders were bowed and his eyes bleared as if the weekend had lasted a generation and aged him by that much.

He blocked my entrance with his soft reluctant body. "I'm not supposed to let anybody in."

"You wanted to talk to me yesterday."

"Did I?" He seemed to be trying to remember. "Mother will slay me if I do."

"I doubt that, Fritz. The secret's out anyway. We just dug up Leo Broadhurst."

His heavy gaze came up to my face. He seemed to be trying to read his future in my eyes. I could read it in his: a future of fear and confusion and trouble, resembling his past.

"May I come in for a minute?"

"I guess so."

He let me in and closed the door behind me. He was breathing audibly, as if the action had used up most of his strength.

"You told me yesterday that you buried Mr. Broadhurst. I thought you meant Stanley. But you meant his father Leo, didn't you?"

"Yessir." He looked around the sparse room as if his mother might have bugged it. "I did a terrible thing. Now I've got to suffer for it."

"Did you kill Leo Broadhurst?"

"No sir. All I did, I buried him with my 'dozer when he was already dead."

"Who put you up to it?"

"Albert Sweetner did."

He nodded in confirmation of his own statement, then looked at me to see if I believed it. I neither believed nor disbelieved it.

"Albert Sweetner made me do it," he said.

"How could Albert make you do it?"

"I was ascared of him."

"You must have had more of a reason than that."

Fritz shook his head. "I didn't want to bury him. I got so nervous I couldn't run the machine. Albert tried to take it back to the compound. He ran it in the ditch off Rattlesnake Road, and they caught him with it and sent him back to prison."

"But you got off scot-free?"

"I did that time except that I got fired and put in the nursing home. They never found out about Mr. Broadhurst."

"Does your mother know what you and Albert did?"

"I guess she does. I told her."

"When did you tell her?"

He considered the question. "Yesterday, I guess it was."

"Before I was here, or after?"

"I don't remember." Fritz was showing signs of moral strain. "You keep coming back and back. And my memory keeps jumping around on me. I keep remembering when Digger got my daddy."

"When Digger got him?"

"That's right, when they buried him out at the cemetery. I could hear the dirt plunking down on the coffin." Tears formed on his face as if it was deliquescent, drawing moisture from the air.

"Did you tell your mother before I was here, or after?"

"After, I think it was. *After* you were here. She said if I told another soul they'd send me straight off to prison." He lowered his tangled head and gave me an up from-under look. "Will they send me to prison now?"

"I don't know, Fritz. Are you sure that you and Albert didn't kill him?"

The idea seemed to shock him. "Why would we do a thing like that?"

I could think of several reasons. Leo Broadhurst had been lucky, and they had not. He had married the richest woman around. He had tumbled the prettiest girl, and got her with child, and Albert and Fritz had taken the rap for it.

Fritz was alarmed by my silence. "I swear I didn't kill him. I swear it on the Bible." There was an actual Bible on the table, and he rested his

palm on the black cloth cover. "See, I swear it on the Bible. I never killed anybody in my life. I don't even like to trap a gopher. I hate to step on a snail. They've all got feelings!"

He was weeping actively again, possibly over the deaths of snails and the agonies of gophers. Above the watery noises he was making I heard a car in the street and looked out through the front window. An old white Rambler pulled up at the curb behind my car. Mrs. Snow got out with a heavy paper bag in her arms. She was wearing a raincoat over slacks.

I went outside, closing the door on Fritz. His mother stopped abruptly when she saw me.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"I had a talk with your son."

"Can't I leave the house without you persecuting him?"

"That's hardly the case. Fritz told me he buried Leo Broadhurst's body. I understand he told you, too, so we needn't argue about it."

"That's nonsense, he's talking nonsense."

"I don't think so," I said. "We dug Leo up this afternoon. It hasn't been established yet, but I think that he's been dead for fifteen years."

"Frederick knew all this and didn't tell me?"

"He told you yesterday, didn't he?"

She bit her lip. "He told me some kind of a story. I thought he was making it up out of whole cloth." Her face brightened alarmingly. "Maybe he *is* making it up. His head's always full of stories."

"He didn't invent the dead man, Mrs. Snow."

"Are you *sure* it's Captain Broadhurst?"

"Reasonably sure. The body was in his red Porsche."

"Where did you find it?"

"Almost directly under the place where Stanley was buried. Stanley was trying to uncover his father when he was killed. Whoever killed him probably shot his father as well."

"And you blame Frederick?"

"I wouldn't go that far. But if he buried the captain, as he says, he's an accessory."

"Does that mean he'll go to prison?"

"He could."

She was appalled. Her thin face was stretched taut across her skull. It was like a foreglimpse of her mortality, and it made me realize how deeply involved she was with her son's fate.

She stood in silence for a minute, glaring up and down the street as if to dare the neighbors to pity her. There was no one in sight except for a few brown children too young to care.

It was early afternoon, but the day had darkened. I looked up at the

sky. Black clouds were moving across it like a sliding lid. Under them the town looked bright and strange. A little rain had begun to fall on the sidewalk and on my head and on the woman's.

The heavy brown grocery bag was beginning to slip out of her arms. I took it from her and followed her inside. Fritz had retreated into the back, but both of us seemed to feel his amorphous presence virtually filling the house.

His mother carried her groceries into the kitchen. When she came back into the front room she noticed that the Bible on the table was slightly out of place. She pushed it back into the exact center before she turned to me:

"Frederick is crying his heart out in his room. You can't put him in prison. He wouldn't last six months. You know what they do in prison to helpless boys —the dreadful cruelties and the wickedness."

I knew, but I didn't want to dwell on it. "He isn't a boy." I remembered that Mrs. Broadhurst had said the same thing forty-eight hours ago.

"He might as well be," Mrs. Snow said. "Frederick has always been my little boy. I've done my best to protect him, but he gets led astray. He does what people tell him to do, and then he has to suffer for it. He suffers terribly. He almost died when they put him in forestry camp."

Her thin body was vibrating with feeling. It was hard to believe that body, breastless and almost hipless, had mothered the large soft boy-man in the bedroom.

"What do you want me to do with him, Mrs. Snow?"

"Leave him here with me. Let me look after him, like I always have."

"That will be up to the authorities."

"Do they know what he did?"

"Not yet."

"Do you have to tell them?"

"I'm afraid so. There's a murder involved."

"You're still talking about the murder of Captain Broadhurst?"

"Yes. That's the only one your son's mixed up in. I hope."

"I'm sure you're right." She looked at me intently. "I'm going to tell you something I've never told a living soul. You say Captain Broadhurst was shot?"

"Apparently he was."

"With a .22-caliber pistol?"

"We don't know yet. What were you going to tell me?"

"I think I know who shot him. I can't swear to it, but I think I know. If I can tell you, and it turns out to be right, can you make it easier for Frederick?"

"I can try."

"They'll listen to you." She nodded her head emphatically. "Will you promise to use your influence?"

"Yes. What information do you have?"

"It's more of a general picture. Ever since Stanley was killed on Saturday, the whole thing has been coming back to me. I was at the Broadhurst house that night, looking after Stanley. It was the same night that Frederick misused his tractor and lost his job. The whole thing fits together."

"Exactly what happened?"

"Give me a chance to tell you." She sat down in the platform rocker rather abruptly, as if the effort of memory had fatigued her. "The two of them, Captain Broadhurst and Mrs. Broadhurst, had a bad quarrel at dinner. I was in and out of the dining room. They didn't say much in my presence, but I gathered they were quarreling over a woman—a woman he had stashed in the Mountain House. I thought at first it was the Kilpatrick woman, because the name of Kilpatrick came up. But it turned out it was that Nickerson girl—Marty—and she had her little girl with her. Captain Broadhurst was planning to go away with her and the little girl. He had tickets on a steamship to Hawaii which he had just bought, and Mrs. Broadhurst found out."

"How did she find out?"

"Mr. Kilpatrick told her, according to what she said. The man in the travel agency was a friend of Mr. Kilpatrick's."

I felt a change behind my eyes, as if a physical adjustment had occurred there. My witnesses were beginning to chime with each other. Mrs. Snow went on with her story:

"It was a nasty quarrel, as I said. Mrs. Broadhurst went into the long history of his womanizing. He turned around and blamed it all on her. I won't tell you the names he called her. But he claimed she hadn't been a wife to him in ten years, and he got up and stomped out.

"Poor little Stanley was sick and shaking. He was having his dinner in the kitchen with me but he couldn't help hearing the quarrel, and he was old enough to know what it meant. He ran out and tried to stop his father, but Captain Broadhurst roared away in his sports car. Then his mother got ready to leave the house. Stanley wanted to go with her, but she wouldn't take him. She asked me to put him to bed, which I did. But after that I was busy in the kitchen, and he slipped out on me. I remember the shock it gave me when I went to check his bedroom and saw his empty pillow.

"I got another shock when I was going through the rooms looking for him. Mrs. Broadhurst's pistol case—the one her father left her—was sitting on top of the desk in the study. The box of shells was lying there

open, and one of the pistols was gone." She looked up, unseeing, remembering. "I didn't know what to do, so I did nothing. I waited for her and Stanley to come home."

She sat in her platform rocker, resigned but somehow expectant, as if she was still waiting for that night to end. "They were gone for well over an hour. And when they came home, mother and son, they came home together. Their feet were wet from the night grass, and they were both white and scared-looking. Mrs. Broadhurst hustled Stanley off to bed and dismissed me. When I got home my own boy was missing from his bed. It was a bad night for mothers."

"And a bad night for sons," I said. "Do you think Stanley saw his father killed?"

"I don't know. I do know he heard the shot. He told me later his mother killed an owl—that was the explanation she gave Stanley. But I think that he suspected she shot his father. I think the suspicion kept growing on him, but he couldn't face up to it. He kept trying to prove that his daddy was alive, right up until the day of his own death."

"Did he ever discuss his father's death with you?"

"Not his death. We never mentioned death. But he sometimes asked me what I thought had happened to his father. And I used to tell him stories—that his father had gone to live in another country, like Australia, and maybe he would be coming back some day." Her eyes came up to my face, clear and intense. "What else could I do? I couldn't tell him what I suspected—that his mother shot his father."

"And your son buried him."

"I didn't *know* that at the time." But her voice hurried away from the point. "Even if I had, I wouldn't have told Stanley, or anyone else. A woman's got to look out for her own flesh and blood."

chapter 33

I LEFT HER and drove through pouring rain to the hospital. It was a four-story concrete building occupying a city block and surrounded by clinics and medical office buildings. A Pink Lady in the lobby told me that Mrs. Broadhurst was able to receive visitors and gave me the number of her room on the fourth floor.

Before going up I paid a visit to the pathology department. The office and lab were on the ground floor at the end of a sickly green corridor lined with heating pipes. A sign on the door said: "Authorized Personnel Only."

A stoic-faced man in a white smock greeted me with polite disinterest. The name board on his desk said: "W. Silcox, M.D." He told me that the body of Leo Broadhurst hadn't arrived yet, but was expected shortly.

Behind his horn-rimmed spectacles, the doctor's eyes showed a certain professional eagerness. "I understand there's quite a lot of him left."

"Quite a lot. You should look for gunshot wounds, particularly in the head. I've talked to a couple of witnesses who think he was shot there. But my witnesses aren't entirely dependable. We need concrete evidence."

"That's what I'm here for. I tend to learn more from dead people than I do from living ones."

"Do you still have Stanley Broadhurst's body?"

"It's in the mortuary. Would you like to see it?"

"I have. I wanted to check with you on cause of death."

"Multiple stab wounds, with some kind of long knife."

"Front or back?"

"Front. In the abdomen. He was also struck at the base of the skull with the pickax."

Going up in the elevator to the fourth floor, I almost envied Silcox his unliving witnesses. They were past lying, past hurting and being hurt.

I checked in with the girl at the nurses' station. She said that Mrs. Broadhurst was feeling much better, but I should limit my visit to ten minutes or so.

I tapped on the door of Mrs. Broadhurst's private room and was bidden to come in. The room was full of flowers in and out of season—roses and carnations, exotic lilacs. A vase of yellow daffodils on the dresser had Brian Kilpatrick's card standing on edge against it.

Mrs. Broadhurst was sitting up in an armchair beside the streaming window. She had on a multicolored robe which seemed to reflect the flowers in the room, and she looked quite well. But there was a basic hopelessness about her eyes which tied my tongue for a moment.

She spoke first: "You're Mr. Archer, aren't you? I'm glad to see you—to have a chance to thank you."

I was taken by surprise. "What on earth for?"

"My grandson's safe return. His mother phoned me a short time ago. With my son—my son Stanley gone—Ronny is all I have left."

"He's a good boy, and he seems to be all right."

"Where did you find him? Jean wasn't quite clear about it."

I gave her a collapsed account of my weekend and said in conclusion: "Don't blame the girl too much. She saw your son killed, and it threw her. All she could think about was saving Ronny."

I remembered as I said it that Susan had witnessed two murders, fifteen years apart. And I asked myself: if Mrs. Broadhurst killed her husband, was it possible that she had also killed her son, or had him killed? I found I couldn't ask her. Filled with her fragile gratitude, and the flowers her friends had sent her, the room wouldn't let such questions be spoken aloud.

As witnesses often do, Mrs. Broadhurst provided an opening herself. "I'm afraid I don't really understand about the girl. What did you say her name was?"

"Susan Crandall."

"What was she doing on the mountain with my son and grandson?"

"I think she was trying to understand the past."

"I don't quite follow. I'm very stupid today." Her voice and eyes divided her impatience between herself and me.

"Susan had been there before," I said, "when she was a small child. She went there with her mother one night. Perhaps you remember her mother. Her maiden name was Martha Nickerson, and I believe she used to work for you."

The displeasure in her voice and eyes deepened. "Who have you been talking to?"

"Quite a number of people. You're just about the last one on my list. I was hoping you could help me to reconstruct what happened at the Mountain House that night about fifteen years ago."

She shook her head, and stayed with her face half-averted. Profiled against the window, her head was like a classical medallion laid over the rain-blurred image of the city.

"I'm afraid that I can't help you. I wasn't there."

"Your husband was, Mrs. Broadhurst."

The cords in her neck pulled her head around. "How can you possibly know that?"

"He never left the place. He was shot and buried there. We dug him up this afternoon."

"I see." She didn't tell me what she saw, but it seemed to make her eyes grimmer and smaller. The bones in her face became more prominent as if in imitation of the dead man's. "It's over then."

"Not entirely."

"It is for me. You're telling me that both my men are dead—my husband and my son. You're telling me that I've lost everything I held dear."

She was struggling to assume a tragic role, but there was a doubleness in her which spoiled her resonance. Her words sounded exaggerated and hollow. I was reminded of the ambivalent words that she had written about her father, staggering across the yellow foolscap toward the edge of breakdown.

"I think you've known that your husband was dead and buried for fifteen years."

"That simply isn't true." But the doubleness persisted in her voice as if she was listening to herself read lines. "I warn you, if you make this accusation publicly—"

"We're very private, Mrs. Broadhurst. You don't have to put on a front with me. I know you quarreled with your husband that night and followed him up the mountain afterwards."

"How can you know that if it isn't so?" She was playing a game that guilty people play, questioning the questioner, trying to convert the truth into a shuttlecock that could be batted back and forth and eventually lost. "Where did you get this alleged information, anyway? From Susan Crandall?"

"Part of it."

"She's scarcely a reliable witness. I gather from what you've told me

that she's emotionally disturbed. And she couldn't have been more than three or four at the time. The whole thing must be fantasy on her part."

"Three-year-olds have memories, and they can see and hear. I have pretty good evidence that she was in the Mountain House, and saw or heard the shot. Her story jibes with other things I know. It also helps to explain her emotional trouble."

"You admit that she's disturbed?"

"She has a hangup. Speaking of hangups, I wonder if Stanley didn't witness the shot, too."

"No! He couldn't have." She drew in her breath audibly, as if she was trying to suck back the words.

"How do you know if you weren't there?"

"I was at home with Stanley."

"I don't think so. I think he followed you up there and heard his father shot, and for the rest of his life he tried to forget it. Or prove that it was just a bad dream he had."

She had been talking like an advocate who doubted his client's innocence. Now she gave up on it. "What do you want from me? Money? I've been bled white." She paused, and looked at me with despairing eyes. "Don't tell Jean I have nothing left. I'd never see Ronny again."

I thought she was wrong, but I didn't argue. "Who bled you, Mrs. Broadhurst?"

"I have no wish to discuss it."

I picked up Brian Kilpatrick's card from the dresser and let her see it. "If someone has been extorting money from you, you have a chance to stop it now."

"I said I don't want to discuss it. There's no one I can trust. There never has been since my father died."

"You want it to go on?"

She gave me a closed bitter look. "I don't want anything to go on. Not my life or anything. Certainly not this conversation. This inquisition."

"I'm not enjoying it much myself."

"Then go away. I can't stand any more."

She grasped the arms of the chair so that her knuckles whitened, and stood up. The action somehow forced me out of the room.

I wasn't ready to face the dead man right away. I found the door to the fire stairs and started down to the ground floor, taking my time about it. The concrete stairs with their gray steel railings, set in a windowless concrete stairwell, were like part of a prison structure, ugly and just about indestructible. I paused on a landing halfway down and tried to imagine Mrs. Broadhurst in prison.

When I returned the boy Ronny to his mother, I had really accomplished what I set out to do. The business left unfinished was bound to be painful and nasty. I had no overriding desire to pin her husband's murder on Mrs. Broadhurst.

The hot breath of vengeance was growing cold in my nostrils as I grew older. I had more concern for a kind of economy in life that would help to preserve the things that were worth preserving. No doubt Leo Broadhurst had been worth preserving—any man, or any woman, was—but he had been killed in anger long ago. I doubted that a jury in the present would find his widow guilty of anything worse than manslaughter.

As for the other homicides, it was unlikely that Mrs. Broadhurst had had a reason to kill her son or an opportunity to kill Albert Sweetner. I told myself I didn't care who killed them. But I cared. There was a winding symmetry in the case that like the stairs themselves took me down to the sickly green corridor where Dr. Silcox consulted his dead witnesses.

I went through the office and opened the steel-sheathed mortuary door. What was left of Leo Broadhurst lay under a bright light on a stainless steel table. Silcox was probing at the skull. Its fine curve was the only remaining sign that Leo had been a handsome man in his day.

Kelsey and Purvis, the deputy coroner, were standing in the penumbra against the wall. I moved past them toward the table.

"Was he shot?"

Silcox looked up from his work. "Yes. I found this."

He picked up a lead slug and displayed it on the palm of his hand. It looked like a misshapen .22 long.

"Where did it pierce the skull?"

"I'm not sure it did. All I can find is a minor external crease which hardly could have been fatal." With the bright point of his probe, he showed me the faint groove the bullet had made in the front of Broadhurst's skull.

"What killed him then?"

"This."

He showed me a discolored triangle which rang on the table when he dropped it. For a moment I thought it was an Indian arrowhead. Then I picked it up and saw that it was the broken-off tip of a butcher knife.

"It was lodged in the ribs," the doctor said. "Evidently the tip of the knife snapped off when the knife was pulled out."

"Was he stabbed from the back or the front?"

"The front, I'd say."

"Could a woman have done it?"

"I don't see why not. What do you think, Purvis?"

The young deputy detached himself from the shadows and stepped

forward between me and Dr. Silcox. "I think we better talk it over in private." He turned to me. "I hate to be a spoilsport, Mr. Archer, but you've got no right in here. You saw the sign on the door: 'Authorized Personnel Only.' And you're not authorized."

I thought perhaps it was just a young man's officiousness. "I am if you authorize me."

"I can't do that."

"Who says so?"

"The sheriff-coroner gives me my orders."

"Who gives him *his* orders?"

The young man flushed. His face looked porous and purplish in the raw light. "You better get out of here, mister."

I looked past him at Kelsey, who seemed embarrassed. I said to both of them:

"Hell, I located this body."

"But you're not authorized personnel."

Purvis put his hand on the butt of his gun. I didn't know him well and didn't trust him not to shoot me. I left with anger and disappointment running hot and sour in my veins.

Kelsey followed me out into the corridor. "I'm sorry about this, Archer."

"You weren't a great deal of help."

His gray eyes flinched a little and then set hard, while his mouth continued to smile. "The word came down from on high about you. And the Forest Service makes me go by the book."

"What does the book say?"

"You know as well as I do. Where local law enforcement is involved, I'm instructed to respect their jurisdiction."

"What are they planning to do? Bury this case for another fifteen years?"

"Not if I can help it. But my main responsibility is the fire."

"The killings and the fire are tied together, and you know it."

"Don't tell me what I know."

He turned and went back into the room with the dead man and the authorized personnel.

chapter 34

WHEN I WENT OUTSIDE THE RAIN was coming down harder than ever. Water was running in the street, washing the detritus of summer downhill toward the sea.

The nearer I got to the mountains, the more water there was. Driving up Mrs. Broadhurst's canyon was very much like making my way upstream in a shallow watercourse. Long before I reached the ranch house I could hear the roaring of the creek behind it.

Brian Kilpatrick's black car was standing in front of the house. An artificial-looking blond whom I didn't recognize at first was sitting in the front seat. When I approached the black car I saw that she was Kilpatrick's fiancée, as he called her.

"How are you feeling today?" I said.

She lowered the electric window and peered at me through the rain. "Do I know you?"

"We met Saturday night at Kilpatrick's place."

"Really? I must have been stoned." Her lips stretched in a smile which asked for my complicity. Behind it she seemed terribly uneasy.

"You were stoned. Also you were a brunette."

"I was wearing a wig. I change them to suit my mood. People tell me I'm very mercurial."

"I can see that. What kind of a mood are you in?"

"Frankly, I'm scared," she said. "I'm scared of all this water. And the mud is coming loose above Brian's house. He's got tons of it in his patio already. That's why I'm sitting here in this car. But I don't like it here much, either."

"What's Brian doing inside?"

"Business, he said."

"With Jean Broadhurst?"

"I guess that's her name. Some woman called him and he dashed right over here." She added as I turned toward the house: "Tell him to hurry, will you?"

I went in without knocking and closed the front door carefully behind me. The noise of the creek was humming through the house, covering the small sounds my movements made.

There was no one in the living room. A light shone from the open door of the study. When I went nearer I could hear Jean's voice:

"I don't like this. If Mrs. Broadhurst wants these things, she could have asked me for them."

Kilpatrick answered her in a throwaway tone: "I'm sure she didn't want to bother you."

"But I am bothered. What does she want in the hospital with business papers and guns?"

"I assume she wants to get things shipshape in case anything happens to her."

"She isn't planning to kill herself?" Jean's voice was thin and breathless.

"I sincerely hope not."

"Then why does she want the guns?"

"She didn't say. I'm simply trying to keep her happy. After all, she is my business partner."

"Still I don't think I should let you—"

"But she just called me."

"I think I'll call her back."

"I wouldn't do that."

His voice had a threat in it. There was the scrape of feet and a woman's gasp. I stepped into the doorway. Jean was sprawled on the black leather couch, white-faced and breathing hard. Kilpatrick was standing over her with the telephone receiver in his hands.

"Try someone your own size," I said.

He moved as if he was going to attack me. I wanted him to, and perhaps he saw that. The color drained from his face, so that the broken veins stood out like abrasions.

He offered me a shameful little smile which didn't change his reddened apprehensive eyes. "Jean and I had a little misunderstanding. Nothing serious."

She got up, smoothing her skirt. "I think it's serious. He pushed me down. He's taking some of my mother-in-law's things."

She indicated the black briefcase standing beside the desk. I picked it up.

"I want that," Kilpatrick said. "It belongs to me."

"You may get it back eventually."

He reached for it. I swung it away from his grasp. In the same movement I leaned my shoulder into him and walked him backward. He came up hard against the opposing wall and slouched there like a man hanging on a nail. I went over him for weapons, found none, and stepped back.

For a moment his face wore the look of terrible disappointment that I had surprised on it the day before. He was losing everything, and watching it go.

"I'm going to take this up with Sheriff Tremaine," he said.

"I think you should. He'll be interested in what you've been doing to Mrs. Broadhurst."

"I'm her best friend, if you want the truth. I've been looking after her interests for many years."

"She calls it bleeding her."

He seemed surprised. "Did she say that?"

"She used the word. Don't you like it?"

He was still against the wall. His reddish-brown hair was turning dark with sweat and falling over his high freckled forehead. He pushed it back with his fingers, carefully, as if a neat appearance might make all the difference.

"I'm disappointed in Elizabeth," he said. "I thought she had more sense. And more gratitude. But that's a woman for you."

He gave me a tentative look to see if we could get together on an anti-feminist platform.

"No gratitude," I said. "No gratitude to you for blackmailing her and cheating her out of her land. Women are terrible ingrates."

He couldn't stand the unfairness of my remarks. A bright bitterness entered his eyes and changed his mouth. "Anything I did was perfectly legal. That's more than you can say for her. While she was telling you lies about me, I don't suppose she mentioned what she did."

"What did she do?"

I shouldn't have asked the direct question. It reminded him to be discreet.

"I don't believe I'll answer that."

"Then I'll tell you. Mrs. Broadhurst shot her husband. You may have put her up to it. Certainly you had a hand in it."

"That's a lie."

"Didn't you tell her about Leo's freighter bookings to Hawaii? Wasn't that what sparked their final quarrel?"

His gaze came up to mine, then moved away sideways. "I thought he was planning to take my wife with him."

"Your wife had already left you."

"I was hoping she might come back to me."

"If you could find a cat's-paw to get rid of Leo?"

"I had no such intention," he said.

"Didn't you? You incited the Broadhursts' quarrel. You watched the Mountain House that night to see what came of the quarrel. You witnessed the shot, or heard the sound of it. And when it failed to kill Leo, you finished him off with a knife."

"I absolutely did not."

"Somebody did. And you were there on the spot. You haven't denied it."

"I deny it now. I didn't shoot him and I didn't knife him."

"Tell me what you did do."

"I was an innocent bystander, that's all."

I laughed in his face, though I wasn't feeling merry. I hated to see a man, even a man like Kilpatrick, go down the tubes. "Okay, innocent bystander. What happened then?"

"I think you know what happened. But I'm not going to say it. And if you're as smart as you think you are, you'll play along with me. Right now I want my briefcase."

"You'll have to take it away from me."

He looked at me as if he was considering it. But he was running short of desire and hope. The aura of success had deserted him, and he was looking more and more like a loser.

He turned and went as far as the front door before he answered me. Just before he slammed it behind him, he called back:

"I'm going to have you run out of town."

Jean came up to me, moving quietly with one hand out as if darkness had set in and the place was unfamiliar. "Are those things true?"

"What things?"

"The things that you were saying about Elizabeth."

"I'm afraid they are."

She took hold of my arm and let me feel her weight. "I can't stand much more. How long is this going to go on?"

"I don't think there is much more. Where's Ronny?"

"He's asleep. He wanted a nap."

"Get him up and dressed. I'm going to drive you to Los Angeles."

"Now?"

"The sooner the better."

"But why?"

I had a number of reasons. I didn't want to go into the main one, which was that I didn't know what Kilpatrick might do next. I remembered the gun in his game room, and his apparent willingness to use it.

I took Jean to the big corner window and showed her what had happened to the creek. It had become a turbulent dark river, large enough to float fallen trees. Several of them had formed a natural dam which was backing up the water behind the house.

I could hear boulders rolling down the creekbed in the upper canyon. They made noises like bowling balls in an alley.

"The house may go this time," I said.

"That isn't the reason you want to take us south."

"It's one reason. You and Ronny will be safer there. And I have some things to attend to. I'm supposed to report to Captain Shipstad of the LAPD. There are certain advantages in working with him instead of the local law."

Those advantages had become clearer in the last hour, and I decided to call Arnie now. I went into the study and dialed his office number.

His voice was cool and distant: "I expected you to get in touch with me before now."

"Sorry. I had to go to Sausalito."

"I hope you had a nice weekend," he said in a flat Scandinavian tone.

"It wasn't so nice. I turned up another murder. An old one." I gave him the facts of Leo Broadhurst's death.

"Let me get this straight," he said. "You're telling me that Broadhurst was killed by his wife?"

"She shot him, but the shot may not have killed him. He had a broken knife blade in his ribs. Of course she could have put the knife in him."

"Could she have killed Albert Sweetner?"

"I don't see how. Mrs. Broadhurst was in the Santa Teresa hospital Saturday night. It had to be someone else who did the Northridge killing."

"Who do you have in mind?"

I paused for a moment to organize my thoughts, and Arnie spoke impatiently: "You there, Lew?"

"I'm here. There are three main suspects. Number one is a local real estate man named Brian Kilpatrick. He knew that Elizabeth Broadhurst shot her husband, and I think she's been paying him off ever since. Which gives him a reason for killing Stanley Broadhurst and Albert Sweetner."

"What reason?"

"He had a large financial interest in keeping the original murder quiet."

"Blackmail?"

"Call it disguised blackmail. But it's still possible he finished off Leo Broadhurst himself. If so, he had an even stronger reason for silencing the other two. Albert Sweetner knew where Leo was buried. Stanley Broadhurst was trying to dig him up."

"But why would Kilpatrick want to knife Leo Broadhurst?"

"Broadhurst broke up his marriage. Also, there was money in it for him, as I said."

"Describe him, will you, Lew?"

"Kilpatrick's about forty-five, over six feet, around two hundred pounds. Blue eyes, wavy red hair getting thin on top. Broken veins in the nose and face." I paused. "Was he seen in Northridge Saturday?"

"Right now I'm asking the questions. Any scars?"

"None visible."

"Who are the other suspects?"

"A motel-owner named Lester Crandall is number two. He's heavy and short, about five-seven and one-eighty. Graying black hair with long sideburns. Talks like a good ole country boy, which he is, but he's shrewd and heavily loaded."

"How old?"

"He told me he'll be sixty on his next birthday. He had a motive as strong as Kilpatrick's for knocking off Leo Broadhurst."

"Sixty is too old," Arnie said.

"It would expedite matters if you laid your cards on the table. You have a description you're trying to match, right?"

"A sort of one. The trouble is, my witness may not be reliable, and I want independent confirmation. Who's your other suspect?"

"Kilpatrick's ex-wife Ellen could have done it. Leo broke up her marriage and then dropped her."

"It wasn't a woman," Arnie said. "Or if it was, my theory goes to pieces. Did any other adult male have motive and opportunity?"

I answered slowly, with some reluctance: "The gardener, Fritz Snow, who buried Leo's body with his tractor. I wouldn't have said he's capable of murder, but Leo did give him provocation. So did Albert Sweetner, for that matter."

"How old is Snow?"

"About thirty-five or -six."

"What does he look like?"

"He's five-ten, maybe one-sixty. Brown hair, moon face, green eyes which cry a lot. He seems to have emotional problems. Also genetic ones."

"What kind of genetic problems?"

"Harelip, for one thing."

"Why didn't you say so?"

Arnie's voice had risen. I held the receiver away from my ear. Jean was leaning with her hands on the door frame, watching me. Her face was pale, and her eyes were darker than I had ever seen them.

"Where is this Fritz Snow?" Arnie said.

"About a mile and a half from where I'm sitting. Do you want me to pick him up?"

"I better do it through channels."

"Let me talk to him first, Arnie. I can't believe he killed three people, or even one of them."

"I can," Arnie said. "That wig and mustache and beard that Albert Sweetner was wearing didn't belong to Sweetner. They didn't fit him. It's my hypothesis they belonged to the killer, who put them on Sweetner to confuse the issue. We've been canvassing the wig shops and supply houses. To make a long story short, your suspect bought the wig and beard at a markdown store on Vine Street called Wigs Galore."

I didn't want to believe it. "He could have bought them for Al Sweetner."

"He could have, but he didn't. He bought them a month ago, when Sweetner was still in Folsom. And we know he bought them for his own use. He asked the salesman for a mustache that would cover the bad scar on his upper lip."

Jean spoke when I set the receiver down. "Fritz?"

"It looks that way." I told her about the wig and beard he had bought.

She bit her lip. "I should have listened to Ronny."

"Did he recognize Fritz on the mountain Saturday?"

"I don't know about Saturday. He told me several weeks ago that he saw Fritz with long black hair and a mustache. But when I questioned him further, he said that he was telling me a story."

We went into the bedroom where the boy was sleeping. He woke with a start when his mother touched him and sat up hugging his pillow, wide-eyed and shaking. It was my first naked glimpse of his hurt and fear.

He spoke with an effort: "I was afraid the bogy man would get me."

"I won't let him get you."

"He got Daddy."

"He won't get you," I said.

His mother took him in her arms, and for a little while he seemed content. Then he grew impatient of purely female comfort. He freed himself and stood up on the high bed, his eyes close to the level of mine. He bounced, and was temporarily taller than I was.

"Is Fritz the bogy man?" I said.

He looked at me in confusion. "I don't know."

"Did you ever see him wearing a long black wig?"

He nodded. "And whiskers, too," he said a little breathlessly. "And a whatchamacallit." He touched his upper lip.

"When was this, Ronny?"

"The last time that I visited Grandma Nell. I went into the barn and Fritz was there with long black hair and whiskers. He was looking at a picture of a lady."

"Did you know the lady?"

"No. She had no clothes on." He looked embarrassed, and scared. "Don't tell him I told you. He said if I told anybody that something bad would happen."

"Nothing bad will happen." Not to him. "Did you see Fritz on Saturday wearing his wig?"

"When?"

"Up on the mountain."

He looked at me in confusion. "I saw a bogy man with long black hair. He was away far off. I couldn't tell if it was Fritz or not."

"But you thought it was, didn't you?"

"I don't know."

His voice sounded strained, as if his clear childish memory had registered more than he was able to cope with. He turned to his mother and said that he was hungry.

chapter 35

I DROPPED THEM off at a downtown restaurant and drove back through the ghetto to Mrs. Snow's house. Brown water was running in the road in front of it. I parked on the blacktop driveway behind her old white Rambler and locked my car.

Mrs. Snow opened the front door before I could knock. She looked past me into rain as if there might be other men behind me.

"Where's Fritz?" I said.

"He's in his room. But I can do any talking that needs to be done. I always have—I guess I always will."

"He'll have to do his own talking, Mrs. Snow."

I went past her into the kitchen and opened the door of her son's room. He was crouched on the iron bed, hiding part of his face with his hands.

He was a helpless foolish man, and I hated what I had to do. A trial would make a public show of him. In prison he would be the bottom man, as his mother feared. I could feel her anxious presence close behind me.

I said to him: "Did you buy a wig a month or so ago? A wig and a beard and a mustache?"

He dropped his hands away from his face. "Maybe I did."

"I happen to know you did."

"Then what are you asking me for?"

"I want to know why you bought those things."

"To make my hair look long. And to cover this." He lifted his right forefinger to his scarred upper lip. "The girls won't let me kiss them. I only kissed a girl once in my life."

"Martha?"

"Yeah. She let me do it to her. But that was a long time ago, about sixteen or eighteen years. I read about these wigs and stuff in a movie magazine, so I went down to Hollywood and bought an outfit. I wanted to chase the chicks on Sunset Strip. And be a swinger."

"Did you catch any?"

He shook his doleful head. "I only got to go the once. She doesn't want me to have a girlfriend."

His gaze moved past me to his mother.

"I'm your girlfriend," she said brightly. "And you're my boyfriend." She smiled and winked. There were tears in her eyes.

I said: "What happened to your wig, Fritz?"

"I don't know. I hid it under my mattress. But somebody took it."

His mother said: "Albert Sweetner must have taken it. He was in the house last week."

"It was gone long before last week. It was gone about a month ago. I only got to chase the chicks the once."

"Are you sure about that?" I said.

"Yessir."

"You didn't drive down to Northridge Saturday night and put it on Albert's head?"

"No sir."

"Or wear it up the mountain Saturday morning—when you knifed Stanley Broadhurst?"

"I *liked* Stanley. Why would I knife him?"

"Because he was digging up his father's body. Didn't you kill his father, too?"

He shook his head violently, like a mop. His mother said: "Don't, Fritz. You'll do yourself an injury."

He stayed with his head hanging, as if he had broken his neck. After a time he spoke again: "I buried Mr. Broadhurst—I told you that. But I never killed him. I never killed none of them."

"Any of them," Mrs. Snow said. "You never killed *any* of them."

"I never killed any of them," he repeated. "I didn't kill Mr. Broadhurst, or Stanley, or—" He lifted his head. "Who was the other one?"

"Albert Sweetner."

"I didn't kill him, neither."

"Either," his mother said.

I turned to her. "Let him do his own talking, please."

The sharpness in my voice seemed to encourage her son: "Yeah. Let me do my own talking."

"I'm only trying to help," she said.

"Yeah. Sure." But there was a dubious questioning note in his voice. It issued in speech, though he kept his hangdog posture on the bed: "What happened to my wig and stuff?"

"Somebody must have taken it," she said.

"Albert Sweetner?"

"It may have been Albert."

"I don't believe that. I think you took it," he said.

"That's crazy talk."

His eyes came up to her face, slowly, like snails ascending a wall. "You swiped it from under the mattress." He struck the bed under him with his hand to emphasize the point. "And I'm not crazy."

"You're talking that way," she said. "What reason would I have to take your wig?"

"Because you didn't want me to chase the chicks. You were jealous."

She let out a high little titter, with no amusement in it. I looked at her face. It was stiff and gray, as if it had frozen.

"My son's upset. He's talking foolishly."

I said to Fritz: "What makes you think your mother took your wig?"

"Nobody else comes in here. There's just the two of us. As soon as it was gone, I knew who took it."

"Did you ask her if she took it?"

"I was afraid to."

"My son has never been afraid of his mother," she said. "And he knows I didn't take his blessed wig. Albert Sweetner must have. I remember now, he was here a month ago."

"He was in prison a month ago, Mrs. Snow. You've been blaming Albert for quite a number of things." In the ensuing silence I could hear all three of us breathing. I turned to Fritz. "You told me earlier that Albert put you up to burying Leo Broadhurst. Is that still true?"

"Albert was there," he answered haltingly. "He was sleeping in the stable near the Mountain House. He said the shot woke him up, and he hung around to see what would come of it. When I brought the tractor down from the compound, he helped me with the digging."

Mrs. Snow moved past me and stood over him. "Albert told you to do it, didn't he?"

"No," he said. "It was you. You said that Martha wanted me to do it."

"Did Martha kill Mr. Broadhurst?" I said.

"I dunno. I wasn't there when it happened. Mother got me up in the middle of the night and said I had to bury him deep, or Martha would go to the gas chamber." He looked around the narrow walls of the room as if he was in that chamber now, with the pellet about to drop. "She told me I should blame it all on Albert, if anybody asked me."

"You're a crazy fool," his mother said. "If you go on telling lies like this, I'll have to leave you and you'll be all alone. They'll put you in jail, or in the mental hospital."

Both of them could end up there, I was thinking. I said: "Don't let her scare you, Fritz. You won't be put in jail for anything you did because she made you."

"I won't stand for this!" she cried. "You're turning him against me."

"Maybe it's time, Mrs. Snow. You've been using your son as a scapegoat, telling yourself that you've been looking after him."

"Who else would look after him?" Her voice was rough and rueful.

"He could get better treatment from a stranger." I turned back to him: "What happened Saturday morning, when Stanley Broadhurst borrowed the pick and shovel?"

"He borrowed the pick and shovel," Fritz repeated, "and after a while I got nervous. I went up the trail to see what they were doing up there. Stanley was digging right where his father was buried."

"What did you do?"

"I went back down to the ranch and phoned *her*."

His wet green gaze rested on his mother. She made a shushing noise which narrowed into a hiss. I said over it:

"What about Saturday night, Fritz? Did you drive down to Northridge?"

"No sir. I was here in bed all night."

"Where was your mother?"

"I don't know. She gave me sleeping pills right after Albert phoned. She always gives me sleeping pills when she leaves me by myself at night."

"Albert phoned here Saturday night?"

"Yessir. I answered the phone, but it was her he wanted to talk to."

"What about?"

"They were talking about money. She said she had no money—"

"Shut up!"

Mrs. Snow raised her fist in a threat to her son. Though he was bigger and younger and probably stronger, he crawled away from her on the bed and huddled crying in the corner.

I took hold of Mrs. Snow's arm. She was taut and trembling. I drew her into the kitchen and shut the door on the dissolving man. She leaned on the counter beside the kitchen sink, shivering as though the house was chilly.

"You killed Leo Broadhurst, didn't you?"

Mrs. Snow didn't answer me. She seemed to have been overcome by a terrible embarrassment that tied her tongue.

"You didn't stay in the ranch house that night when Elizabeth Broadhurst and Stanley went up the mountain. You went up there after them

and found Leo lying unconscious and stabbed him to death. Then you came back here and told your son to bury him and his car.

"Unfortunately Albert Sweetner knew where the body was buried, and eventually he came back here hoping to turn his knowledge into money. When Stanley failed to show up with the money Saturday night, Albert phoned here and tried to get some more out of you. You drove down to Northridge and killed him."

"How could I kill him—a big strong man like Albert?"

"He was probably dead drunk when you got to him. And it never occurred to him that he was in danger from you. It never occurred to Stanley, either, did it?"

She remained silent, though her mouth was working.

"I can understand why you killed Albert and Stanley," I said. "You were trying to cover up what you'd done in the past. But why did Leo Broadhurst have to die?"

Her eyes met mine and blurred like cold windows. "He was half dead already, lying there in his blood. All I did was put him out of his misery." Her clenched right hand jerked downward convulsively, reenacting the stabbing. "I'd do the same for a dying animal."

"It wasn't compassion that made you murder him."

"You can't call it murder. He deserved to die. He was a wicked man, a cheat and a fornicator. He got Marty Nickerson pregnant and let my boy take the blame. Frederick has never been the same since then."

There was no use arguing with her. She was one of those paranoid souls who kept her conscience clear by blaming everything on other people. Her violence and malice appeared to her as emanations from the external world.

I crossed the room to the phone and called the police. While the receiver was still in my hand, Mrs. Snow opened a drawer and took out a butcher knife. She came at me in a quick little dance, moving to jangled music I couldn't hear.

I caught her by the wrist. She had the kind of exploding strength that insane anger releases. But her strength soon ran out. The knife clattered on the floor. I pinned her arms and held her until the police arrived.

"You'll shame me in front of the neighbors," she said desperately.

I was the only one watching as the patrol car moved away through the brown water with Fritz and his mother sitting behind a screen in the back seat. I followed them downtown, thinking that quite often nowadays the low-life subplots were taking over the tragedies. I gave a more prosaic explanation to a team of police detectives and a stenotypist.

My statement was interrupted by a phone call from Brian Kilpatrick's fiancee. Kilpatrick had walked into his game room and shot himself.

The briefcase I took from him, containing Elizabeth Broadhurst's guns and records, was in the trunk of my car. I let it stay there unreported for the present, though I knew all the facts of Leo Broadhurst's death would have to come out at Edna Snow's trial.

Before night fell, Jean and I and Ronny drove out of town.

"It's over," I said.

Ronny said, "That's good." His mother sighed.

I hoped it was over. I hoped that Ronny's life wouldn't turn back toward his father's death as his father's life had turned, in a narrowing circle. I wished the boy a benign failure of memory.

As though she sensed my thoughts, Jean reached behind him and touched the back of my neck with her cold fingers. We passed the steaming remnants of the fire and drove on south through the rain.

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